THE NEW ADVENTURES

Doctor Who

THE DEATH OF ART

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AN ORIGINAL DOCTOR WHO NOVEL

HE DID NOT KNOW IF HIS POWERS COULD SAVE HIM UNTIL THE HORSES' HOOVES HAD CRUSHED HIS RIBS AND HIS HEART HAD STOPPED BEATING. AFTER THAT, IT WAS OBVIOUS.

1880s France: the corrupt world of the Third Republic. A clandestine brotherhood is engaged in a desperate internal power struggle; a race of beings seeks to free itself from perpetual oppression; and a rip in time threatens an entire city. The future of Europe is at stake, in a war fought with minds and bodies altered to the limits of human evolution.

Chris finds himself working undercover with a suspicious French gendarme; Roz follows a psychic artist whose talents are attracting the attention of mysterious forces; and the Doctor befriends a shape-shifting member of a terrifying family. And, at the heart of it all, a dark and disturbing injustice is being perpetrated. Only an end to the secret war, and the salvation of an entire race, can prevent Paris from being utterly destroyed.

Doctor WHO

SIMON BUCHER-JONES is yet another civil servant with a long-standing love of SF, Fantasy and **DOCTOR WHO**. He currently pretends to know about computers for the Home Office, but would rather you all bought his book.

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THE DEATH OF ART

Simon Bucher-Jones

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The ending of all hope is come.

Its leaden beat denying song.

The messenger of nothingness

who's nothing more and nothing less

than all that's pallid, wan and wrong.

The pounding of that self-same drum

that serves it as a human heart

repeats the beat that changes never

from which no soul can stand apart

within its innards rack and lever.

A human figure from without,

its tatters hide the cogs and wheels

inside its bland and friendless face.

It haunts the death of all that feels

all places with no pride of place.

This is the ending worse than doubt.

All other dooms are rich beside.

The beasts disdain to lick his hands

he stirs no rupture of the tide

no strange births of forgotten lands.

This is the ending less than dust.

Unless the dust has been your dream,

and nothingness your playfellow,

and then it's cruel as the machine,

inhuman as the King in Yellow.

This endlessness unending must

become its own incarnate tomb.

Its blood and bone its ball and chain.

Its dreams the pain of afternoon

forever in the fervid brain.

Naotalba's Song

(From '**The King in Yellow**' ,

a verse-play written in Paris in the 1890s and banned by the French authorities.)

Chapter 0

Before any conflict, there are already ripples in the water where the spears will fall.

Natal proverb

L o n d o n : 18 D e c e m b e r 1845

It was just after eight. The freezing weather and the blank greyness of the morning fog squeezed passers-by into buildings until the streets were empty. In the offices of the *Daily News,* two ramshackle houses knocked together, an old man in a moth-eaten greatcoat waved his fist in Charles Dickens's face. The smell of yeast and low snuff came off the clothes under the greatcoat. They were red and yellow, and tattered.

'I won't stand for it,' the man snarled.

Dickens edged sideways, keeping the solid oak of his desk between himself and his visitor. Although Dickens was the younger of the two, he was small and wiry compared to the ancient man in the greatcoat. He seemed to have solidified with age into something more dense than normal flesh. The room smelt of him. Dickens felt a stab of fear.

'Quite right,' he said. 'No one could be expected to stand it. I couldn't stand it. No, not for a moment.' Sweet reasonableness. That was the key. Now, if only the fellow would explain why he was complaining. The first typesetters'

copy of the *Daily News* was on Dickens's desk and he wanted to check it. There had already been dozens of delays with the printing. He seized on the normality of the thought.

'This is what I mean and well you know it.' A hand came 1

down *thump* on the typesetters' copy. "This impudent prying.

You thought better of putting it all into that Christmas Book but even so you're too near things best left a-lying. Stick to stealing your illustrator's ideas for fat rogues, and leave other people's lives and doings alone!'

Not waiting for a reply, his face redder than his fancy Punch-and-Judy man's waistcoat, the man clattered down the wooden stairs to the

street below.

Alone, Dickens sighed gloomily. Even tramps off the street had heard the slander that he had stolen the character of Mister Pickwick from Seymour's illustrations. He tried to tell himself that it was a passing mood, like the depression *The Times's* review of his Christmas book 'The Cricket on the Hearth' had caused. The reviewer had said that it was unworthy of the name of literature and possessed of neither merit nor truth.

Only the notion that *The Times* was bitter about Dickens'

prospective rival paper, the *Daily News,* had finally raised his spirits.

Of course, 'The Cricket on the Hearth'! That was what had offended the stranger. He must have thought himself maligned in the character of Tackleton, the toy-maker who hated children and found satisfaction in the construction of cunning grotesque creatures of wood and paint calculated to drive a child to fits or worse. Dickens smiled wanly. He had found the initial idea for Tackleton in Patrick Matherhyde's history of the parishes of York. That book had recounted the rise and fall of the C o x h a m firm of Montague and Tackleton, which had floundered in the late 1780s. Its downfall had been a scandal involving a doll's house built to resemble Ilbridge House, but Matherhyde had been either uninformed or carefully reticent about the details.

Dickens's caller would surely see that no slur was intended at his expense if he could be located and the matter explained to him.

Dickens called Henry, the eight-year-old printer's boy, into his office, quickly gave him a description of the toyman and, with a liberal gift from the petty cash, set him on the man's trail.

2

Reassured that the problem was, or would soon be, solved, Dickens turned to the first page-proofs of the *Daily News.*

This was what he needed, a cheerful gust of liberality and common sense. His antidote to the gory refuse that sold half the papers on Fleet Street. Even *The Times* had given space to the so-called 'pygmy murders'.

His eye caught a line of poetry. It would be something inspirational, no doubt, picked by his co-workers. He read: *As each Doll its place*

maintains

so it the fading life sustains.

If the Dolls be fed and plump

so the waning heart will pump.

If the maker do the deed

which allows the Dolls to feed,

fearing neither man nor hell,

they will prosper, wax and swell.

Live forever and escape

in the end from human sha...

Dickens tore his eyes from the page. What was this dog-gerel rubbish, this unpleasant morbidity, doing in his paper?

He looked for the author's name. There was no poem. There was only normal prose set in newspaper columns.

Suddenly he felt very cold and ill, as if not all the sweet air and light in the world could do him any good, as if there was no sweet air or light anywhere; only night and stars that were the empty eyes of dolls gazing blankly from the ownerless heavens.

'Nonsense,' he said loudly, three times, until the staff looked in from the print works, Henry not being there to head them off, and he felt infinitely reassured that their eyes were flesh and not glass. Shooing them out, he poked the fire to life reflectively. Something had happened that he did not understand. Something unnatural. He shuddered. A writer treasures his imagination; his dreams. For a moment he had felt them twist like snakes in his grasp.

He realized that, despite the cold, he was sweating.

* * *

3

Dickens had started looking for Henry as soon as he had recovered from his experience with the proofs, but it was afternoon before he

found him. The boy was on his way back, shivering in the winter chill. Dickens paid for some hot pies for the boy and himself, and they sat on the steps of one of London's old churches to eat.

Henry, his hunger abated, picked a piece of gristly flesh from between his teeth.

'His name's Montague, Mr Dickens. He's got a toyshop down Billingsgate way, but none of those I know there ever buy from him. There's talk he's got a frightful temper, and no one seems to know what he lives on, save the drink.'

'Even a toy-maker must eat,' Dickens said, and the nervousness of his own voice surprised him.

Henry sniffed. 'Maybe, but if he eats more than his dolls do, he's never seen to do it. I don't like it, Mr Dickens. It ain't right.'

Dickens saw Henry was hesitating, and recognized that the boy was wary of confiding further. He lowered his voice.

'Montague did something while he was in my office. He tampered with the proofs of the paper. I need to find out if he's working for a rival.' He passed Henry another coin.

Henry looked rueful. 'Mrs Singleton - she's past fifty and her eyesight's failing, but she gives her affy davy that she saw one of the doll's heads in his window open its eyes and look at her. And they say at night the heads whisper to each other.'

It was later that Dickens, full of brandy and alone, trotted nervously down the back alleys. The noxious overflow of the gutters bit into his nostrils. The cold deadened the smell somewhat but, shivering in the thick wool of his dreadnought coat, he was still uncomfortably aware of the decay. This part of London, windward of Billingsgate and damp as a fish's underbelly, sucked all the joy out of walking. Not even blowing steam like a boiler in great clouds of condensing breath cheered his spirits.

The decision to pay the disgruntled toyman back seemed 4

unnecessary or dangerous now, in the back streets. Crumpets and toast and a crackling fire would meet the case much better. Kate and the children would be waiting for him at home. Why not let the mouldering old toy-maker fume in his garret, nursing his imaginary grievances? It would serve him best not to be taken seriously. Perhaps

even magnanimity would defeat him. A suitably impressive goose or a plum cake might set Montague alight with the combustion of his humours, like a living brandy-snap.

No, Dickens knew in his chilled heart that an appeal to good fellowship or even to self-interest would be as lost on Montague as if it was wine poured into the Dead Sea. The thought pushed him to a decision. He would find the shop and mark it well for a visit in the light and dry. Noon, not a rain-soaked afternoon, was the time to confront Montague. In the heat of the sun the alcoholic vapours would boil off, leaving him a thin straggly wretch, a mere doll or puppet.

Shivering, Dickens decided that was not a cheerful thought after all. The image of Montague with a face of porcelain from which a film of drink evaporated, like a ghost leaving a corpse, was just the kind of overwrought imagining that the damp engendered. He turned to retreat down the Dock Road. A thin scratching sound came from the overhanging warehouses to his left. He ignored it. He was round the corner, leaning forward like a man walking into a headwind.

There was nothing to keep him here and every comfort to be found elsewhere, and yet he found it harder and harder to place one foot in front of another. The noise of the scratching, unnaturally loud through the rain, reverberated in his head. As he turned he saw the first of the dolls crawling towards him.

He ran from the back street, and from London and the *Daily News,* and the books he wrote from that day onward were colder and bleaker than any he had written before. He never saw Montague or his dolls again. Twenty years later he told some of the story to a drunken Wilkie Collins and they cautiously approached the site of Montague's shop at noon 5

on the longest day of the year, but the shop was a blackened shell, burnt for many, many years.

Paris: 2 2 M a r c h 1884

Blinking in the noonday sun, Viers followed the six-year-old boy along the street between the rue Richelieu and the rue St-Roch in the direction of the Eglise.

The massive bulk of the Church St Roch, which was scarcely shorter than Notre Dame itself, was concealed by the tall houses. Viers imagined it dark as his undertaker's coat against the early evening sky, its architecture of high chapels topped with a single cupola. Just so, *la*

Fraternité was concealed by the mundane world which hung like a series of veils before the light at the heart of things. There were so many veils.

When his instructor, Boucher, had first told him of the accursed Family, Viers had baulked at assisting in the kid-napping of a child, even to free it from the hell of such a life, but now he had seen for himself the Devil's marks on Emil, he knew where his duty lay. Crouching back in the empty doorway of a shattered townhouse, he put his mind in contact with his instructor's master.

The sickly breaking-down of the barriers between mind and mind was, as always, unpleasant. He began the chant which the Grandmaster's tame wizard had taught him.

'Malelt Tilad Ahyram. Asai Asai Evohe, Malelelt Tilad Ahyram.' His voice faltered over the half-familiar sounds. A Catholic by childhood instruction, he had shied away at first from this ritual of strange words with their echoes of something heavy, almost diabolical. Only gradually had he come to understand that it was this taint that the Grandmaster was fighting, albeit with its own weapons. For, as a poisoned dagger wrenched from a murderous and irredeemable attacker may, in the tight and pressing *mêlée* of a struggle, be used lawfully, so these powers could if taken up by the clear-minded be used in the service of man and God.

Coldly at first, then with a fire that burnt without the 6

comfort of warmth, he began to think into the thoughts of his master. In words his report would have been: 'Brother Viers here. The youngest of them is heading towards St-Roch. I suspect he will stop at the square with the fountain carved with bluebirds.' In truth he expressed more than that. Telepathy was not speech, and even when a thought was phrased as a sentence it travelled in a cloud of images and surrounding sub-thoughts.

At that instant, walking in the place de Verdome by the columned statue of Napoleon where the politicians con-gregate when the Palais Bourbon is not in session, the younger deputies nudged each other as they saw the old man on the seat stiffen momentarily, and his left hand shudder involuntarily on his knee.

'Old Jean Mayeur is having one of his fits,' said one, behind his perfectly manicured hand. Even in the Council of Deputies where a man might hold power for as long as his purse was full, Mayeur was

among the longest-serving members. He was an embarrassment really, the younger men thought. Still, he couldn't last much longer, could he?

In his mind Jean Mayeur, the Grandmaster of the Brotherhood, read Viers's zeal with every brilliantly coloured thought.

He felt Viers's passing judgement of the architecture of the church in the image of its brooding oddity, and experienced the touch of fear that Viers had felt as the skin of the child had darkened in the sunlight as he left the house, changing from the purest white to the black of the Devil's heart. Viers's imagery was excessive, but he was loyal. Loyalty was rare enough to make even simple-mindedness no hindrance to advancement.

Indeed, it could be an asset. Jean Mayeur knew his servant's resolve, and he knew it was good. With Emil in his hand, he would consolidate his hold over his agent within the Family, and if in the process of turning them back to the Fraternal Brotherhood and saving them from their foolishness they stood with him against Montague, so much the better.

Opening his eyes, he squinted up at the statue of Napoleon.

It had been torn down by the Bourbons on their restoration, 7

only to be replaced later by the order of Napoleon III. Perhaps some day his statue would be there. If so he would never let it be torn down.

They had snatched the child from the square reasonably easily.

Boucher had been waiting when Viers reached it; a pad soaked with ether in the pocket of his badly cut jacket. The child had still fought like a mad thing. Eerily, the voice with which it screamed had changed to match the mutations in its body.

Now it lay face down and still on the slab of stone.

Viers reached out and touched its shoulder. The child's skin was rough and unnatural, and its nails were long like talons. Viers's cheek still ached from the struggle in the alley-way. The child had torn a jagged strip an inch long from the right side of his face. The Brotherhood's healers would need to look at it if it was not going to scar.

Boucher leant forward over the slab. His movements were taut and

brisk.

'So this is the youngest of the little fish who have swum out of the nets of the fishers of men.' Deftly, with a grace that his humped back denied, he reached for one of the knives. Viers grabbed his hand. Despite the way the child had fought, he could not stand by and let him be gutted. 'He's just a b o y '

'Just?' The word seemed to be an alien one in Boucher's throat. Viers wondered how he could ever have admired the man. In that moment of doubt the child was upon them.

Somehow its body had rejected the effects of the ether. It fastened its teeth into Viers's shoulder. They had grown long like a wolf's.

Boucher, leaving Viers to take the brunt of the attack, stepped back. He clasped his hands together and brought them down in a massive two-handed blow to the side of the child's head. The boy dropped like a sack of meal.

'Just a boy, eh!' Boucher snorted.

Viers clutched at the wound the boy had made in his shoulder, and blood seeped between his fingers. He gritted his teeth. 'We are not going to kill him. The Grandmaster wants him alive.'

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Boucher shrugged, his hump moving oddly on his back.

'As you wish. Tie him up until the Grandmaster can decide this, but be it on your own head.' Firmly, without trying to cause pain, Viers tied the child's wrists.

Boucher watched him, scowling. Viers was so solicitous of the creature's welfare, so smug in his assurance that the Grandmaster was benevolent. This was going to be a pleasure. Smirking, the hump-backed man smashed his hands down hard on the back of Viers's neck. Viers gave a throttled gasp deep in his chest and lay still, slumped over the boy.

Boucher laughed his wicked little laugh. The child was his now.

The one o'clock shift was changing in the sewers. Monsieur Pierre Duval stood in the gallery of the sewer Asinieres, a lean white-haired wraith against the dark stonework. Often, when his fellow workers

were scurrying to the light at the end of their shifts, he would come here and watch the underground river. This gallery, the main sewer below it and the other three great sewers had all been built in his lifetime. Before they had been constructed, he had worked on the ninety-six miles of drains, some tiny, some wide enough to take a man, that had carried the effluvium of Paris to the Seine. He knew even the old drains that Haussmann's rebuilding had overlooked, or had left abandoned out of a lust for symmetry or a distaste for the rotting stonework.

There were stories about the old sewers. Pierre had heard them all. There was the one about the sewerman with the hooded face who uncloaked to reveal the staring iridescent dead eyes of a great fish. There were tales about the lights where the sewers crossed the catacombs under Montrouge to which the dead of Paris had been moved ninety years or more ago. There were many stories of the drains that passed under the parts of Paris shunned by its inhabitants, the house where Alexis Ladeau had cut his throat after piecing together the fragments of a certain 9

book, the street where the murderer Prevost threw scraps of his victims openly into the sewers, and the rue Morgue itself. In legend those drains ran red and thick. Pierre merely shook his head at such imagination. If there were such things in the sewers he would know.

He turned to leave, and did not see the vast scaled back that broke the black waters of the sewer Asinières. A lustrous reptilian sheen of green and blue scales, a hint of yellow-tipped fins, the disturbance was gone in an instant. Below the surface, the scaled body moved sinuously, and three great red eyes blinked behind thick armoured eyelids. Its search went on.

Panting slightly, Boucher dragged Viers to one side. Now the child would die and Montague would reward him. The Grandmaster would be shown as the ineffectual fool he was.

He picked up a knife. Tied on the slab, the child thrashed. Its hands became scythes of bone, fingers fusing into edged weapons.

Boucher watched its attempts to free itself with mild interest. The child was a lively one. Perhaps Montague would wish to examine it? He gathered his mental energies to contact one of Montague's adepts for an apportation. He would have the boy moved to the vats for investigation.

The stonework shattered. Something huge and reptilian broke into the crypt. Boucher caught a glimpse of three red glowing eyes as the overhand swipe of a talon broke his neck. The blow, smashing down through Boucher's collar-bone, sliced through the leather corset he wore under his coat. Black bat-wings spilled free from the artificial hump. In the corner the dazed Viers screamed, imagining himself the puppet of the damned.

Turning slowly in the confining space, the creature scooped up the body of the boy. Stirring for a second on the edges of consciousness, Emil brushed the rough scales of the creature with his bone hands, and a murmur of recognition escaped his lips.

'Uncle J o h a n n . . . '

10

Paris: St Vincent C e m e t e r y : 11 J u n e 1995: 3**.17 p.m.**

The time-rift appeared in the broken, open mouth of a family vault with a flare of gangrenous light. The rifts, the consequences of a bungled attempt at time travel, had once threatened to rip up time like so much grunge denim. Now they made living in the past an easy commute. Or they had.

The rift should have been the swirling blue-green oil-on-water colour of the Time Vortex. It should have been more than three centimetres wide. Ace glanced at the big bag of sanitary towels and antiseptics, at the bags of tinned luxury goods, and at her arms and legs. Bloody typical, she thought.

Two hours of study later, her bootleg time technology was bleeping plaintively, and s h e ' d had to chase off three tourists who had thought the rift was some sort of sick advertising stunt. She scuffed up the tickertape print-out from the miniature quartz-rodded whatnot she was using as a time-sensor.

Weird. Late nineteenth-century Paris was spattered with splodges of psionic energy. Nearly six point two on the Vantala Psycho Scale. What the hell did that mean? Hadn't the Doctor once told her that the highest reading he'd ever seen was five point something? That had been a planetary telepathic gestalt powered by multiple genocide. Ace had a sinking feeling that the scale was exponential. A reading of six point two could mean anything from a young Osirian to a Capitalized Evil-From-The-Dawn-Of-Time. It was starting to look as if she would not always have Paris.

The effect on the rifts had to be a consequence of the psychic energies. There were a set of distortions in the time stream around 1884, and another huge one late in 1897.

Between those two focuses the Time Vortex was subject to a phenomenon that Ace speculatively identified as being 'one crukking big snafu'.

This bit, big time. She couldn't get back to the 1890s until someone sorted out the disturbances. There was only one candidate. Despite their clashes of personality she trusted the Doctor to sort out anything: act of God or gods; fire; flood; or 11

ants in the picnic-basket of time. Of course, he did not exactly take house calls.

She had read the 500-year diary that he had pressed into her hands in their clumsy, hurried goodbyes. Theoretically, she could send a message somewhere, somewhen, that he had been, but she dismissed the idea almost as soon as it swam into her head. It was bad manners, really. Besides, if asking a past Doctor to help her *now* gave the Doctor she had travelled with as Ace another creepy secret to keep from her *then,* it would not be fair to either of them. It would be like hiding things from her younger self, and knowing someone else would get the blame.

A general distress call was also out of the question. She could probably rig some sort of signal, but she had no intention of attracting any more alien invaders to Earth, the perennial home away from home, it sometimes seemed, for any race with a bad temper, battleships and bad haircuts.

It was a pretty little problem. After a while, though, she had a solution that she was certain would not go unnoticed, and she had a suspicion it might be a laugh as well.

After she had sent the pulse out into the Time Vortex, through the rift, she stretched out against a tombstone and opened a can of Diet Coke and a cheap copy of Edgar Allan Poe's *Tales of Mystery and Imagination* that she had bought in the English second-hand book shop on the quai St-Michel.

The past was back in the Doctor's hands. Just time for a snack and more sightseeing, then. There was a clockwork figure in Le Quartier de l'Horloge she wanted to show Jason.

It was called 'The Protector of Time'.

In the Tardis: 11.04 by the O r m o l u Clock Roz Forrester was looking for the Doctor. The Time Lord had been prowling round the TARDIS on his own for the last few days. A presence in its cloisters, like a ghost, or the reflection of a drowned man. Chris thought it was a reaction to the cheerfulness of Bernice's reunion with her father, to the evident success of her marriage, as if the Doctor was the sad one on the stairs at the cosmic party.

Roz thought that was bunk. Besides, speculation about the Doctor's inner life made her feel queasy. She eventually found him in the long gallery, in one of the balconies off the tertiary staircase, staring at a curved glass vase. In its glossy blue stained surface Roz's face rose over the Doctor's shoulder like an eclipse of the moon.

'What's so interesting about an old vase?'

The Doctor placed it back carefully on the marble-topped occasional table. 'It wasn't this old yesterday.'

'It looks new.'

'It is new,' the Doctor snapped. 'It just wasn't this old yesterday.'

'How much older? Twenty-four hours?'

"Three hundred and twenty years.'

Roz waited. The Doctor would start explaining in a minute.

He could no more bear not to than a human could switch on a respiratory bypass system or regenerate. Sometimes she thought that the only reason he kept her and Chris around was so that he might explain things. Perhaps even to explain himself. The anthropic principle personified in a scruffy Time Lord.

The Doctor was pacing back and forth irritably.

'It's an art nouveau vase made by Lalique in Paris at the end of the nineteenth century. Yesterday, when I passed this way, it was a Klein Bottle armature vase made by the Micro-Gravity Works on Vesta in 2219.'

Roz hesitated. She knew it did no good to argue with the Doctor. Still,

like marriage, she supposed, ignorance triumphed over experience every time. "The TARDIS shifts its infrastructure round faster than an organ-legger changes retina prints.

Surely one vase can't matter.'

'It's not just this. There's been a lot of nineteenth-century furnishings in the TARDIS lately. Besides.' He pointed upwards with one long finger, and raised his eyes as if the heavens were falling.

Roz looked up. The TARDIS ceiling, normally a vague opalescent mass, was a jigsaw of paintings. It looked like the winter hobby room of intelligent insomniac bees.

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Honeycombed images. The clashing angles of the frames meant that it was a moment before Roz realized they all showed the same picture. Millions of grey-clad figures peering from gilded frames, images of dolls endlessly repeated on the TARDIS ceiling, bent into the arched contours of a cathedral.

The droolings of a mad Michelangelo.

'Veber's "The Doll-maker", a painting of a madman staring fixedly at a doll and ignoring a beautiful woman. Painted in 1896,' the Doctor snarled. 'Do you like it? Because I don't.'

Roz started to answer, but the Doctor had already turned and run off down the corridor. Ghostly stained-glass light from around the paintings fell behind him like the shadows of dominoes. His voice, like that of the Cheshire Cat, remained behind for a moment: 'Get Chris and meet me in the console room. I think someone is trying to tell us something.'

When Roz and Chris reached the console room, the Doctor was already crouching over the controls. ' I ' m going to turn off the TARDIS force-field for an instant. I think I ' m missing something interesting.'

'Do we get a say in this?' Roz said.

The control shifted under the Doctor's hand. For a second Roz thought she saw surprise on his face. It was rather like someone startling the Statue of Judgement in the Adjudicator Sanctum Sanctorum. Then everything twisted. There was an indescribable noise that was not like

TARDIS materializa-tion. That was because the TARDIS was not materializing.

Then there was a noise like everyone in the TARDIS screaming. That was because they were.

Chapter 1

The wind snapped Roz's scream out of her mouth, so she stopped screaming and concentrated on staying sane. The Doctor shouted something that sounded like 'Cantorian event manifolds' as he ricocheted from the far wall.

The atmosphere felt hot and dense and grey. The roun-delled walls of the TARDIS receded into the distance, as if seen through a haze of smoke or the inert particles they suspend in the air in drive-through Holotheatres; the ones they swear don't cause cancer. Roz felt a tremendous unac-customed sense of vertigo, and realized that her ears were popping. The Doctor had his hat jammed over his and was grubbing in his pockets, probably for boiled sweets. Chris's ears were bleeding and he was hanging from the console as if the room was spinning. His legs kicked wildly at empty space.

The room's structure had shifted. Instead of being roughly square, it was much bigger, stretching out and unfolding. It felt like being on the inside of a self-erecting survival shelter.

Roz tried to follow the topology of one of the console room's angles; and lost it when it stopped being any sort of understandable shape. The walls were showing sky now. Good-quality holographic images. High-density, no flicker. Roz was still admiring them when a pigeon dive-bombed her, and the Arc de Triomphe erupted through the floor, like the Moby Dick of architecture.

The Doctor hit the controls with the manic zeal of a Luddite in a machine shop.

The Arc screeched upwards; pushing underfoot with a force that threw Roz to her knees. A mass of equations briefly scrawled across the sky, upside down and out of focus.

Chris clambered over the console towards her, his bulky muscles getting in the Doctor's way.

The Doctor threw the force-field switch back on.

Silence. Clear air. Then bird-song.

The Doctor fanned his face with his hat and beamed from ear to ear.

'That's the most forceful invitation I think I've ever received, aside from the Rani's ninety-fourth birthday party.'

'An invitation?' Chris said, balancing precariously on the console and rising to his feet.

'Yes, I think so. An image cast into the vortex to be picked up by the TARDIS sensors and imprinted on the interior infrastructure. It's probably been building up for some time.'

He patted the console. "There there, old girl. I didn't mean to ignore you.'

'Doctor!' Chris's voice was full of wonder. 'Look, it's beautiful.' Seen from the height of the console, over the edge of the monument to Napoleon's conquests, the gas-lit river of the Champs-Elysees stretched off into the illusion of distance.

' "Startling" is the word I would use,' Roz said dryly.

The moon rose. The yellow luminous disc was a vast roundel on the wall of the sky. The Doctor reached for the door control.

"The one outside the TARDIS has its charms too,' he said.

He placed his arms round his companions' shoulders. Roz's muscles tensed irritably.

Paris: a week later: 26 N o v e m b e r 1 8 9 7 : 1 1 . 2 5 p.m.

The party was in its full flowering, lush as the hothouse orchids that hung from the roof of the cafe cabaret. The café cabaret's name, 'La Belle Epoch', was a reference to the Parisian elite's self-proclaimed most beautiful of times, held by most to have begun in the mid-1880s and not yet run to its 16

end. Indeed, if the party-goers had their way it would never end.

Time was shut out here. The thick red drapes at the windows excluded the cold watery sunlight. The real weather of the external Paris, stormy and changeable, was firmly pressed back by concealed fires. Music fought with smoke for mastery of the humid air. It was jungle summer here, not bleak Parisian winter nor American Thanksgiving, and David Clayton, far from his native New England, was too busy watching the black woman behind the bar pour absinthe into a long green glass to miss the festival and its family reunions.

A dapper, angular youth, with features almost too modern to be fashionable, his hand shook slightly as he reached for the glass. The loose assortment of francs he threw down clattered on the marble bar top. Despite the hubbub of anti-Dreyfusard political argument and malicious gossip that was the natural background noise of Madame Engadine's private parties, the sound seemed intensely loud. He winced.

Strictly speaking he had, as a guest of the owner's daughter, no need to pay for his drinks, and suddenly the francs looked pitiful even as a tip. The middle-aged Negress pouring the drinks made no attempt to scoop them up. Briefly, he considered taking them back. There really weren't that many centimes between him and poverty these days; not that it seemed to matter here.

This party and others like it had become his life. In all honesty, he could not remember when he had last held a paintbrush, nor what effect he had aimed for when he had.

His days were blurring into a whirl of women in red dresses with long gloves; into a clashing cacophony of fans and black lace. The sad-eyed men in the ill-fitting dinner jackets and their vulgar, blustering mistresses stared as he passed.

The women, whose only hope lay in hooking a fashionable man and smashing his brains out on the fishmonger's slab of matrimony, whispered and fawned in his wake. His dreams, when he could bear to sleep, were more feverish still. He was young, he was well dressed, he was the pampered especial 17

guest of Mademoiselle Engadine. Possibly he was envied by some.

It was said that a person could, if they were lucky enough to be invited regularly, spend the whole Season in one darkened room or another without ever having a solid meal or hearing good said of a beautiful woman other than Madame or Mademoiselle Engadine. David had lasted half a Season so far, but he no longer considered himself fortunate. Not at this time of night. Not with sleep beckoning from behind the scarlet velvet of the curtains.

The smug tight feeling of good fortune that had been the backdrop to his early life was failing him. From high school in New England through to the scholarship that had brought him to study art at the Sorbonne, he had ridden a benevolent fate as a jockey rides a champion. The most talented men had fallen out of his path and the

most beautiful women had fallen into it. Now his luck was dying.

Its death was the sum of a hundred tiny events. A hunch that failed here. An accident that did not rebound in his favour there. He had a scab on his right hand where a glass had cracked as he drank. The bright, deep splash of his own blood had surprised him, as had the sharp tang of pain. The tenants below his garret flat rearranged their furniture at midnight and disturbed his dreams. Claudette Engadine, though beautiful, was often scornful and unattainable. His life drained away into a thousand invisible channels of despair.

Perhaps it was only the human condition. No doubt Dreyfus felt the same. His luck had lasted twelve years before his military career, too successful perhaps for the son of a father both Jewish and in trade, had ended in the trial that was still a topic of conversation in every salon.

David half-turned back to the bar and collided with a man in a linen suit. A battered straw hat, a panama David thought, went bouncing off under the tables. Still unbalanced and slipping, the man clutched at David's arm, upending his absinthe. It spilt in a glittering stream onto the floor.

18

'Oh dear, oh dear.' The man's solemn, crinkled face looked partly deflated, as if its owner might burst into tears at any moment. David, who had been on the brink of anger, felt his annoyance ebb. He exchanged a what-can-you-do-with-them glance at the woman tending the bar and was pleased to see a responding glint in her eyes. He considered her amusement and wondered if she would consider posing for a painting.

Her body was not at all bad. A mature subject, a different subject, would show Claudette he was not to be taken for granted. She had sat only grudgingly for the unfinished portrait in his attic, preferring the company of her mystic philosophers. David was not sure if his fellow countryman Ambrose Bierce had attempted a definition of a mystic philosopher in his celebrated *Devil's Dictionary,* but from the ones who surrounded Claudette he thought the phrase 'a flimflam artist with the vocabulary of a politician' about summed it up.

'Could you reach my hat?' The man was on his hands and knees now, peering across the floor. He waved towards a dark hollow formed by the conjunction of three tables.

Sighing, David stared into the blackness. The hat was a gleam of white at the back of the tables. The hostess nodded encouragement. Well, he was no segregationist; he smiled back. He stretched his arm into the space. The hat was just out of his reach even with his arm pressed painfully hard against the wood. His fingers just brushed its rim. He shoved at the tables, but they were fastened down. This was ridiculous. He flexed his fingers, as if willing the hat to edge into them. With a force that sent a shudder up his arm, the hat flew into his hand. On his feet in an instant, half terrified, he met the small man's eyes for a moment. Their green depths, cooler and somehow clearer than any glass, drained away the shock. Then the man was pressing something wet to his face, and he fainted.

'This is very unorthodox, you know,' the house agent said.

'Most people prefer to see properties in daylight, not at midnight.'

19

Emil did not reply. He was paying enough for the privilege and he had prepared himself accordingly. His voice had assumed the aristocratic tone guaranteed to impress the agent. An hour in bed had increased his height and thinness, and the black frock-coat and opera cape he affected showed off his aristocratic pallor. It amused him to know that if he had presented himself at noon, his skin black as a Negro's, he would have been scorned at best, chased as a thief or beaten and stripped of his fine clothes at worst. It was a sour amusement, but it was all he could manage these days.

The house agent seemed nervous. 'The house was built in 1851. A fine example of Second Empire craftsmanship. I think the price is a very meagre one given its nearness to the avenue de l'Opera.'

Emil started to nod. The price was only a small part of the money Johann had pressed on him when he had left the Family. Old coins doubtless dredged from some subterranean source. At that moment he would have given his soul - if he had one - to own the house. Then his mind emptied into a moment of clarity, and thoughts twirled up through his nostrils like smoke. The house agent was afraid to lose the sale. Although the rue Trianon had shed the title of the rue Morgue, which the press and foreign writers had given it, by the time that Georges-Eugene Haussmann became Prefect of Paris in the 1850s and ordered it levelled, folk memory is not so easily killed. Although the twisting labyrinthine shambles that had been a hiding place for Bourbonists and rebels had long gone, and wide tree-lined streets built

with elegant rows of tall white houses balconied in ornate black wrought iron had risen in their stead, legends remained.

The house was still tainted with rumours of the deaths of Madame L'Espaneye and her daughter. Besides that, the house agent was a generally superstitious man, and he thought Emil looked like a vampire.

The irony almost made the spasm of telepathy worth it, and Emil paid the sum in cash without haggling. If only his own affairs were something so simple.

'Make the arrangements, I will move in tomorrow night.'

20

I will move *back* in, he thought. Back to the one house where I was ever happy.

Paris: 27 N o v e m b e r 1897: 00.05 a.m.

The Doctor finished wiping the young man's face and dropped the sponge back into the pocket of his coat. It had come out wet and fresh, Roz noted, but the Doctor's coat showed no sign of dampness. If only the same could be said of her. Tending a bar in a temperature of about thirty-five degrees, wearing a dress that did not slink so much as stink, was not her idea of an equitable assignment of responsibility. Chris owed her for this. Prehistoric primitives - would it have hurt them to have inducted women into the Gendarmerie?

The Doctor scowled at her, as if he knew what she had been thinking. She frowned back. He had been like that since the TARDIS had materialized here; like a cat listening for something humans could not hear.

'He's going to come round in a minute,' the Doctor said confidentially, gesturing at the young oaf with the American accent. The American lay on the floor still clutching the Doctor's hat, arms stiff and extended. 'Get him out of here and keep him away from anything unusual, and away from absinthe. Not necessarily in that order.'

'Because?'

'Because anyone who can channel enough psionic energy to move this . . . ' - he prised his hat from the man's taut fingers - ' . . . while sozzled on absinthe is going to be a valuable prize for someone; and because

absinthe is the last thing on Earth in this century that a natural psi-sensitive should be drinking.'

Roz could still smell the harmless aniseed scent of the white liquor on her fingers. 'What's so bad about it?'

'Take a selection of herbs: anise; fennel; nutmeg; juniper; hyssop; and wormwood. Add pepper to taste. Soak them in 8 5 % proof industrial alcohol and distil just long enough to sift out a psychotropic drug called Thujone from the wormwood.'

Roz put her hand down. She had almost had a drink of that herself earlier, but the heat had sent her to the iced water behind the bar instead.

'Effects?'

'Like any drink that ends up seventy-five per cent proof, plus terrifying hallucinations, and a level of related violent crime so high that the word "Absinthism" had to be coined to cover it.'

Roz considered. 'So what' seemed a callous response, but she had seen enough Juke addicts in her own time to know what drug users were capable of. The more lethal a drug, the better for society in her estimation. Stupidity could not die out fast enough. She felt something crucial slipping past her.

'Why is it worse for psi-sensitives?'

'Fall-out.' The Doctor must have felt he had scored a point, for his eyebrows waggled furiously. 'Psychic fall-out, that is. Auguries, nightmares, pre-cog episodes, lucid dreams, out-of-body experiences, flashbacks, spontaneous combustions, monsters from the id. The usual. Look up Bernice's monograph about Altair IV sometime.'

Roz knew when the Doctor was right. When his lips move, she thought, quoting the tagline of an old joke at her own expense. Coming round the bar, she helped him prop up the American. The man groaned.

'And just what will you be doing?' Roz asked.

'The same as I've been doing for a week. Trying to get locked up.'

'It doesn't usually take you that long.'

'As a madman. I've been working up the chain of asylums and sanatoriums looking for the most secure, least friendliest, most official booby-hatch in Paris.'

Roz smiled grimly. 'Looking for victims of the fall-out?'

'Yes. I got tired of the last padded cell and escaped. The paperwork was taking too long. So I ' m going to pay a couple of unofficial visits.' The Doctor nodded at the American. 'Look after him, d o n ' t forget what's in your handbag, and stay in touch. Oh, and if you meet any psychics who look about to tear open the fabric of time 22

and space, stop them. Things are very fragile at the m o m e n t . '

In one of the birthing areas, the only one now in use in their tiny lost colony, the entrance of three further parents sent a ripple of speculation spreading. So few new Quoth could be made now that any addition to the Craft was a cause of speculation. Even those of the makers in their final phase of construction created sensing organs to examine the newcomers.

They were unusual in themselves. It was not their number; with appropriate resources any single Quoth could reproduce itself and, according to the Oldest Inhabitants, liaisons of twenty or more Quoth had been known in the vaster dimensions of Quoth Space. It was their configurations.

The first of them possessed few of the aesthetic extensions into the ten spacial dimensions currently favoured by Quoth artists. Instead it had chosen to lodge most of its mass in the time-like 'eckward' dimension. According to the pseudo-science of vectormancy, long transcended by the true Craft but still practised by some Quoth, this indicated considerable energy and singlemindedness, but also suggested a limited experience of society.

The second was arranged as zones of equal potential in all the ten dimensions, and was hence, again according to vectormancy, clearly a well-rounded character with widespread interests.

The third was almost as strongly focused in the time-like

'andward' dimension as the first was in the 'eckward'. This suggested more than a lack of social graces. It showed a complete disdain for the normal experiences of Quoth life.

It was rare for Quoth with dimensions as strongly opposed as those to value each other enough to seek to craft a child. The general consensus among the gossips was that the second parent must be exceptionally patient.

Oblivious to the commotion their arrival had caused, the three parents curled around the cluster of raw matter that would be the core material for the birth. Time passed.

23

After three hundred thousand complex patterns had been worked into the mass the newborn stirred, entwining its barely focused extremities in and out of local space. As yet it was too small to grip the four major dimensions, and its parents were able to suspend it happily between Here and There, and Then and Now, while they contemplated their questions.

This time was crucial. If the newborn could not answer its parents then it would not be a Speaking One, not a member of the Quoth Race.

The first of the three parents asked, <What are the four unknown things? > This was an important ritual question. It was more a test of the memories that every new Quoth should have than a test of sentience, but tradition demanded it.

A fraction later, the second asked, < What is the purpose of the making? > This was harder, but still a basic philosophical idea. A true Quoth should even at birth have summed the memories built into it and begun to draw its own unique conclusions from them.

Time passed. The third parent suppressed its inner shudders and prepared to pattern its question across the plane of energy it had created for the purpose. It was still angry and astonished at its own audacity, even though it had made its decision when the first shape was cut in the raw material. The moment of birth was a point of supreme receptivity and synthesis in the newborn. In the past the young had solved many of the race's problems. Yet now when births had become so rare, no one dared ask a newborn an important question for fear their child might fail to answer and be condemned. The phrase 'vicious circle' did not exist in the pattern language of the Quoth, but the third parent knew the concept well enough. The fewer children, the greater their value, and hence the less likely they would be risked even if that risk might bring great benefit.

<What is the nature of the Blight and the Shadow? > Even as the third parent began its question, the first parent withdrew its mass completely from orthogonal space in protest as it registered in full the act of infanticide. The second quivered in all its multiform dimensions. No successful answer to this question **24**

had ever been found. Their mate had sacrificed their mutual child to no good end.

The Shadow was the rare madness that fell on their kind; forcing them to twist their bodies into meaningless patterns and perform odd tasks. Transitory, it was still shocking and burden-some, although a million pattern-lifetimes could elapse without a case of it. The Blight was worse; it was the Shadow raised to the nth degree. Quoth afflicted by it were permanently cut off from communication with their own kind; slaves to the same madnesses as those merely shadowed but without the hope of the eventual return to normality. The causes of both of the afflictions, or if they even had separate causes, were unknown.

The newborn stirred. <The four unknown things are: the state of things before the beginning; the nature and the shape of the Very Edge; the fate of Quoth Space; and the thoughts of the frozen ones. >

A pause for consideration. The child moved again. <To make is to instruct the self, and to amuse others, and there is nothing else.>

The second parent stopped quivering. <A good answer.

Perhaps we can persuade the assessors that the third had no valid question. >

Neither of the others answered. The first still maintained its distance, not daring to extend its perceptions to sense its child's failure. The third waited, alone in its own thoughts. Had it killed its child? Even if it had not, already the first was traumatized by its action. Who would make art with it ever again after this? Would the first ever forgive it?

The child roiled, its limbs contorting. Tiny chunks of space-time ripped in its clumsy grasp. The drive to answer is strong in a newborn. <I do not know what the Blight and the Shadow are by name, but they have crippled our race for too long. I answer that I will dedicate my lives to seeking their names that we may live without fear of them. >

< Yes. > The second parent convulsed in pleasure. < An answer and a commitment. The child is a true Quoth. > Unfolding from its

dimensional denial, the first parent assented slowly, its patterns full of wonder. < Perhaps the 25

child is more than that! Truthseeker, I name it, and I foresee other names yet to be revealed. We have birthed a wonder. > The third could not find a pattern to express its thoughts.

They lay too deep for patterns. To have the child answer was like an unknown eleventh spatial dimension opening for the first time, like no joy it had ever known. It was the selfish relief that it had not killed, and the selfish knowledge that it had, perhaps, helped birth the Quoth that would save them all. It was the selfless knowledge that a child had not died, and that there was after all hope.

Separated from the vast domains of Quoth Space by the empty desolations of the bleak clusters that surrounded them, at the mercy of the Blight and the Shadow, a moment's hope was worth any risk.

The second parent took the newborn up gently in a fold of space-time.

< Shape my newborn, sweetly shape, do not err. Shadow will not find you here. >

The cold light of the two o'clock moon shone in through the garret window and woke David. He reached out with his hand across the crumpled sheets, and found Claudette gone, if she had ever been there. His memories of the previous night were blurred at best, and in the early morning light he doubted even the possibility of their truth.

He remembered that they had drunk brandy and liqueurs in the Hotel Caillaux near the Gare St Lazare, and spent an hour guessing at the contents of the yellow canvas valise of the traveller in the next booth. Eventually the bearded man, obviously a foreigner, had flung open his case in pity or exasperation at their whispering and showed them his snuff box and his laundry, confirming David's guess. He remembered that they had walked hand-in-hand down the avenue Matignon, and had seen from the place de l'Etoile, behind the houses and across the river, the great crescent moon over the tower remaining from the World's Fair of 1889. He remembered that, as always, they had argued: Claudette holding that Eiffel's three-hundred metre flagpole was nothing but a monstrosity; David 26

holding out for its boldness and efficiency, and hoping it would survive the end of its lease. He remembered that they had gone to La Belle Epoch on the Champs-Elysées . He did not remember what happened next. Whether she had come back here with him, or

whether they had agreed to meet again was all one to him. Memory was no comfort anyway. To remember was not to be sure that those things had happened. In the dark, he felt as if a shutter in his mind had fallen, cutting off his past so that in the earliest morning nothing was available to him but fictions.

He had drunk absinthe initially to quench his dreams. It had not worked. Now they were mingled more horribly with life, until his head ached and he could not remember what was fact and what was fancy. He could see Claudette's milk-white skin and hazel eyes, and the smell of her perfume was in his nostrils, but despite that he could have imagined her - as he had imagined worse things. Even if he found that she was as real today as anything else in the world, he still would not know if last night had been real, or whether they had ended up - as he had once devotedly hoped they would -

in bed, or only in another round of the eternal bickering he remembered about light and shade, art and life, red wine or white, Eiffel or Haussmann, the age of reason or some new sophistry or paradox of her pet cult.

In this half dream he reached for the paper he knew was on the floor; the paper that was, for him at that moment, the only reality. His hand touched a rounded shoulder.

'Who the hell are you?' he shouted, ending with an exclamation badly muffled by a pillow. His arm had been seized and he was suddenly face down into linen stuffed with duck feathers, with a knee in the small of his back.

The Maison Nationale de la Santée at Charenton was an Italianate mausoleum of a building in the middle of a ruined maze of topiary. Its grounds were extensive and patrolled. Its gates were wrought iron, heavy, thick and tall. Its walls were topped with spikes, cut like barbed arrowheads. It was, all in all, the Doctor thought, a splendid example of medical psychology.

27

You would have to be mad to want to be anywhere near the place.

He took one of Jo Grant's old hairpins out of his vest pocket and started to pick the lock on the gates. The sonic screwdriver was no use for this pure mechanical work; besides, the hairpin seemed more eccentric, and hence appropriate.

Roz found herself fully awake with her knee in the back of her suspect. Her witness, she corrected herself. Her whatever-he-would-turn-out-to-be, the man she was supposed to be keeping away from anything odd. Her reflexes were still good. She allowed herself a certain pleasure at that, even if the circumstances were amusing. Twenty-five years of experience had not dulled them.

The weight of the black handbag clutched under her arm reminded her of the gun inside; alien, and as yet untested.

The Doctor must be worried if he wanted her and Chris tooled up. It was refreshingly out of character.

She got off the struggling man, keeping her hands on the pressure points in his neck.

'I think we have to talk. Promise not to make any more sudden moves.' It was not a question.

He grunted. She let go.

'I make any sudden moves!' He was apoplectic. 'You come into my room, and, and

Roz took the initiative smoothly: 'And undressed you, and put you to bed because you were so drunk, and very equitably -' there was a certain edge in her voice as she used that word '- slept on the floor myself so as not to give you the wrong idea.'

'Ah,' said the American ruefully. 'You do seem to have caught me at a disadvantage.' The ghost of a blush lightened his pale face and he thrust a hand out from the rumpled covers. 'David Clayton: artist. I ' m pleased to meet you properly, and thank you for bringing me home.' His eyes, though shadowed by lack of sleep, were brown and attractive. This might not be too bad, Roz thought.

'Roz Forrester, part-time café-cabaret hostess and traveller.'

David nodded. 'Charmed. Only one thing still bothers me.

Did *you* take all my clothes off?'

The ward was the deepest in the building, the furthest inward. It had no external windows, and was painted a rosy pink. It was quiet; very,

very quiet. The Doctor tipped his head on one side like an inquisitive sparrow, and whistled an aria from *The Magic Flute.* The acoustics of the room were strange. The walls had been curved inwards, with plasterwork hiding the angles. The lone patient in the middle bed, flanked by three empty ones on either side, lay curled up, a grey splotch under white sheets. The Doctor read the notes at the end of the bed.

They were remarkably skimpy. No names, no packdrill, no causes of injuries. No evident injuries.

He pulled a black-backed wooden chair over to the bed and sat down. He did not say anything; nor, visibly, did he do anything other than look at the patient. After ten minutes he started to eat the grapes he had brought with him. He made a smacking sound with his lips and spat the seeds into the enamel chamber-pot under the man's bed. After twenty minutes a nurse taking an unauthorized short-cut through the ward glared at him as she strode past. She took another two steps before realizing that it was the early morning shift, and that there were no visitors allowed at any time in that ward.

When she turned around there was no sign of the man or his grapes. The chamber-pot was empty. She frowned, shook her head, and suddenly remembered an errand elsewhere.

After she had gone the Doctor came out from under the bed and reached for the grapes. The man in the grey pyjamas opened his eyes. They were crusted over with dried tears. He started to cough. Finally he spoke in a thin weak voice: 'If you must eat my fruit, at least eat it with your mouth closed.'

The Doctor raised his hand and let a stream of grape seeds fall like rain.

I think you know why I ' m here,' he said in his most official voice.

'I've told my story already'

"They want you to tell it again.'

"Who are they?' the man said, and a determined look entered his watery eyes.

'Oh, isn't there a "they"? I assumed there would be. I mean, you're not

here for your health. Are you?'

'No.'

'So you must be here for some other reason. And the only other reasons I know for being locked up are doing what

"they" think is wrong, or knowing what "they" think is important. Am I right?'

I suppose so.'

'So tell me about it. Perhaps I can help.'

'What do you want to k n o w ? '

The Doctor smiled. 'What have you got?'

Chapter 2

Head aching with other people's secrets, the Doctor opened the TARDIS doors and stepped out of the early morning of the real Paris, onto the replica Arc de Triomphe. The TARDIS console stood out like a wart or a parasitic nodule on the flat roof of the memorial. Leaning forward, against the synthetic wind, he stabbed at the interior wallpaper controls and watched the edges of the mock-Paris begin their slow resolution into the default settings. In the false distance the Eiffel Tower collapsed into extra closet space.

The Arc melted into the floor of the console room like an iceberg that had lost an argument with a sun god. He hesitated as the rectification lapped about Notre Dame, and punched a hold command into the architecture. He might need a cathedral sometime. He could always incorporate it into the Cloisters.

The true shape of the TARDIS interior re-formed around him, and he heard his own breath come harshly. His hearts were both beating fast, for a Time Lord.

This was the first real silence he had experienced since he had stepped out into the cold winter air of the real Paris.

The room in the Charenton Asylum had offered a brief respite, albeit a disturbingly advanced one for this period, but everywhere else the random cluttering of the disturbances in Paris's psychosphere had rumbled inside his head like antique bells. He was running out of old Gallifreyan loom-tenders' rhymes, and if he had to go on to Tibetan mantras or old Venusian lullabies he might as well leave it to Roz and

Chris, and go and lie down with an ice-pack. Antarctica should do the trick.

Now that the noise was gone, his memory of it was fragmenting, breaking down into dislocated snippets of sensation. Sound was no real analogue for it. It tasted like biting iron filings and monkfish. It felt like the blue fur of the Great Sloths of Neopremus. It made the third finger of his right hand ache, and it smelt of spam and war-time cooking. It was an unusual experience for someone as well travelled as him to have an unusual experience, but this was worse than Centauri Colour-Opera. Turning the telepathic TARDIS circuits up to full gain might help, unless it was an attack, in which case it would probably

make things worse. He did it anyway, of course.

At the very start of this regeneration, when aphorisms and saws were running loose in his new head like tiny animals before the forest fire of his renewing Time Lord consciousness, he might have said that the long arm of coincidence had his name on it. Or that someone had crossed his palm with a black cat. Or that he had broken the mirror of the horses of instruction, and the tigers of wrath wanted a word about his seven years of bad luck.

For a time of late, in his many lives, he had acquired a reputation for pre-planning and stage-managing his campaigns against the dark. Sometimes he had a pawn or two concealed about his person. At one time he had always been able to finesse an Ace, even one led by another player. This time he felt forces playing him. Not an old enemy, not a Time Lord megalomaniac with a flash TARDIS and a habit of leaving minuscule bodies in jam-jars and lunch boxes, not even the Black Guardian; something worse. He faced a force that, perhaps, only frequent time-travellers can know. He felt on the back of his neck the soft breath of historical necessity. Was he just playing out a part already ordained by the inexorable grinding engines of eternity? The notion had a certain grandiose Wagnerian inevitability, but not even the most operatic cliche was necessarily untrue. The noise reminded him of fairgrounds, and the Miniscopes that 32

unethical species had once used to pin down their fellows like insects in a box. See the Doctor in the Amazing Loop of Causality. He pokes himself with a stick, and makes himself j u m p .

He straightened his dusty hat and shrugged his shoulders. It would be interesting to find out. Not all the dry philosophies of Gallifrey had ever solved the question of whether Fate or free will ruled the cosmos.

He left the TARDIS, which was frozen as ever (give or take the occasional flicker of interest from its chameleon circuits) into the form of a twentieth-century British Police-box, whistling. It couldn't carry a tune in a bucket, but the high-pitched note that had replaced its usual steady hum spoke of the circuits functioning faster and faster in its more-than-machine heart.

Chris Cwej swivelled in his boss's chair and surveyed the cramped office on the dark side of the Prefecture building.

The chair, pivoting on one of its back legs, threatened to give way and he eased it back into an upright position, feeling faintly ridiculous.

The wooden chair was too narrow for him anyway.

He had lit the gas lamps to augment the fragile sunlight that was just creeping around the side of the building. Under the wavering light he made his eyes scan every surface, every possible clue. He hoped they looked narrow, penetrating, supremely in control. He knew they probably looked bored.

I expect you're all wondering why I called you here,' he rapped. 'One of you murdered Jean Mayeur, and before anyone leaves this room I will unmask that murderer.' The empty room remained unimpressed.

It was so much easier in fiction. In real life not only were there no suspects, at least none to speak of, but the officer who was supposed to be in charge of the case had not even bothered to report for duty yet.

Chris had spent the previous day in the file room of the Prefecture, reading up on Jean Mayeur's political career, trying to find out why anyone would want to kill a reputedly 33

senile octogenarian politician. It had been one of the dullest days of his life. Paris politics made the Landsknechte look airy, open, and enlightened. As near as he could work it out, the Chamber of Deputies was an elected body deriving its legitimacy in theory from universal male suffrage. Universal male suffrage apparently meant that women were not allowed in. He had spent a slightly more interesting twenty minutes trying to find a book that would tell him why. No luck.

In an effort to counter corruption, both the Second Empire and the Third Republic had shaken up the election system to the Chamber. Chris had not had time to find out what the First Empire and the First Republic were, but they had probably had trouble with it as well. In the 1870s it had been operating by departmental proportional representation, then when that was seen to have failed, by single-member con-stituencies, and then in the 1880s by proportional representation again. The only interesting fact was that whatever the method, Jean Mayeur had always got elected for his department. He did not seem to do anything particularly controver-sial, but he was always near those who did. When a deal was made or a treaty broken, he was there to offer to shake the hands of the peacemakers or applaud the warmongers with equal dexterity. Chris wished for the sort of computerized record systems he had formerly taken for granted. There was a reason behind the man's every action; he could feel it.

Unfortunately he was damned if he knew what it was. Or why someone should have hung him up in a faked suicide, forgetting that Doctor Tardieu of the Sûreté's forensic department would discover the quick-acting poison that had really killed him.

One thing that stuck out was the man's ubiquity. He was always there. Only once in twenty-six years had he failed to attend the Chamber, on 9 December 1893. The day the anarchist Vaillant had exploded his bomb.

Chris wondered if he had known, and if so did that mean conspiracy or precognition? If the Doctor was right, and he invariably was - although sometimes in such a confusing way that it was like wrongness seen in a distorting mirror -

someone in Paris had psychic powers so strong that the existence of time itself was in danger.

Chris grinned. He could be fairly certain that whoever it was, it wasn't his murder victim.

A stone clattered softly against the window.

David and Roz greeted the dawn together like two old friends; five hours too late and with hangovers. After their brief struggle midway through the night, David had insisted on opening a bottle of red wine. Goddess alone knew what had been in it, Roz thought. Her head felt like it had bees in it.

She had chivvied David into fetching half a loaf of bread from the patisserie on the corner, while she tidied up the kitchen. Here at least the past's gender-stereotyping played into her hands. Next to the virtual disks in a suspect's sensorama, the habitual programming of an autochef or the contents of a larder defined a lifestyle. The way to a crime's heart was through the stomach. Often violently.

This time, however, the results were inconclusive. According to the contents of his kitchen, David was either a fanatical poisoner with a fearsome collection of moulds - many, Roz suspected, unknown to thirtieth-century toxicology - or he was a sad loner whose next meal was going to be a cold spaghetti sandwich made with stale bread and one patheti-cally small anchovy.

' I ' m back,' David shouted from downstairs. Hastily Roz snatched

some of the least lively cheese from the larder and swept a pile of crockery to the edge of the table. 'I've got some croissants as well,' David said, pushing into the kitchen, barely glancing at Roz's handiwork. 'And throw that cheese away, it's full of mites.'

Roz stared at the cheese. It was slightly mouldy, they all were, but insects? She prodded the cheese with a knife, and watched a white threadlike mass break through the rind.

Interesting. They had not been visible, and David had hardly glanced in the plate's direction. Of course, he might have mites in all his cheese, but even so his perception was 35

unusual. She started a mental list of abnormalities, and then thought hard of something else for five minutes just in case.

Adjudicator-funded studies claimed that anger could help block telepathy, so she thought about her childhood and the unfairness of history.

'What's wrong?' David was looking straight into her eyes over a plate of croissants.

You are, you teepfreak, she thought. Read me, over. He did not blink. She sought leverage. What had the Doctor said were likely signs of psychic fall-out? 'Bad dreams,' she said, and had the satisfaction of watching David's regular features wince as if struck.

'You too?' he said. His voice hovered between hope and commiseration.

Roz nodded. That's right, she thought as strongly as she could, confide in me. I ' m like you. It was a fallacy that it was impossible to lie to telepaths. It took skill but it was not impossible.

David looked her over speculatively. After a moment his eyes dropped and he darted out of the kitchen. Roz watched him scrabbling about in the heap of unwashed clothes and papers around his bed.

'Read this.' He thrust a crumpled sheaf of paper under Roz's nose.

Anton Jarre drew the long blade of the straight razor across his throat. Bristles, some still black, most tainted with grey, flicked onto the white porcelain sink. Stuck to the surface, they resembled mites. He swirled them down with a cup of water. Would that all his problems were so small and could be disposed of with such brisk finality.

'Anton?' his wife's voice came sharp from the parlour.

'Are you still in there? Do you intend to go to work today at all?'

He smiled. The effort helped make his voice sound happy even if his face was hidden from view. 'I'll be there.' A white lie. He had no intention of hurrying in to face those bastards. Georges Picquart was leaving from Gare de Lyon this 36

morning and he was going to see him off, even if no one else would. Time enough to put his own head on the block when he had laid some ghosts.

The Doctor threw another pebble. After the third a blond, close-cropped head looked out for a moment, and a packet fell from the window.

The Doctor picked it up and retired into the shadows to read Cwej's report. It read: 'Current police investiga-tions: disappearances among artists and writers; absinthism among students at the Sorbonne; and four murders, including one of a member of the Council of Deputies, who was due to retire because of ill health and age, and had no known enemies. I ' m assigned to Anton Jarre, the officer investigating that one. Current police scuttlebutt: the Dreyfus case, and no, I don't know what this is, and as everyone assumes I do it's difficult to get a lead. I think it's political or religious. It's hard to tell. My status: the papers seem to have done the trick, but no one wants me working for them. Hurried transfers mean trouble-makers, apparently even in this century. I suspect they've parked me on their biggest trouble-maker. H o w ' s R o z ? '

Claudette Engadine twisted her perfect lips into a little *moue* of distaste. How could David live in this rotting apartment?

Every time she came here she wondered what she saw in him.

If they had not arranged to go to the park, she would have gone straight home again and written to tell him to move somewhere nicer.

Decor was so important. A person was known by the company they could afford to keep, that was obvious, but a house was also the window to the soul. A man who could live here was on the verge of losing all self-respect. She sniffed. David's appeal was already a mystery to her. He was not especially amusing. His jokes were often more painful than anything else. There were handsomer men. Perhaps it was the knowledge that she could help him; that he needed her to

help him. She rested a gloved hand on the banister for **37**

a moment and then rolled the dust between her fingers.

Grimacing, she set off up the stairs.

Roz unfolded the paper carefully. It was thick and yellow.

She still found it hard to believe it was made of pulverized trees. Flint-axe technology. Back to basics.

She read: I know a song worth two of that. A song that sirens dare not sing, a knot that binds within the brain, and turns the wheel of everything. Cassilida's response to Naotalba, before the entrance of the King.' The words seemed innocuous enough, but she had a momentary feeling of discomfort as they were read out, like a stitch catching in a runner's side.

'So who are Cassilida and Naotalba, and who is the King?'

she asked, to fill the silence that had grown while she read.

I don't know,' said David wretchedly. 'It's like my painting, it both is and is not real. It could mean anything but hints at everything.'

"What painting?' Roz snapped, angry with herself. She had seen no sign of artist's materials during her search of the attic flat.

'If you dreamed of a man you had never seen before and sketched him on waking, only to meet him walking up the stair, would your sketch be from life or not?'

Roz considered. 'If that happened, I'd think I must have seen the man before and recalled his face unconsciously. Or perhaps my dream and sketch were so vague that I could imprint the face of the first likely man I met onto them.'

'Oh, I agree,' said David, 'if it was a painting of a man.'

He hesitated, as if trying to justify himself against some imagined allegation. 'It's not only me. Half the writers and half the painters I know are affected. One - don't ask me his or her name because I don't know it - wrote an entire play in their sleep. The play was only performed once before the French authorities ordered the text seized and its acting banned. I was lucky - perhaps my last piece of real luck. I only saw the first act. Since then,' David continued, ' I ' v e found

myself writing in my sleep; writing, and rewriting the first act of that play. Apparently I ' m not the only one.'

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Roz shrugged. 'It seems harmless enough.'

David nodded. 'It's not a Gothic romance, nor a penny dreadful. That's half the horror of it. No one even dies, at least not in the first act. It has no beheadings, no men forced to eat their children, no heads on spikes. Compared to Jacobean tragedy, it's mild as mice. Everything I have written could have a multitude of meanings. Everything up to the beginning of the second act. Sometimes I think I cannot bear not to know what will happen next, and yet I have begun to feel that if I were to write the next scene of the verse play, the opening of the second act, then I would have done something that could never be taken back. I would have stepped into a new world. A horrible world.'

A knock sounded on the flat's door.

Emil awoke to find himself curled up on top of a chest of drawers, and for a moment he could not remember how he had got there.

Then a clean feeling of pride washed over him with the weak sunlight from the dirty window, making his skin tingle and darken.

He was in his house.

None of the others, not even his mother, could understand why he had wanted to come back here. His father in particular had reacted as if that desire, even more than Emil's refusal to take his place in the Family's crusade, had been the final iron shutter lowered between them.

They had lived here when he was six. The house stood five floors and a gable high and had gas lamps only on the bottom two floors, one of which the family had rented, but Emil had loved it. He had at last, among the houses in which he had lived, found one that he could love as he thought a boy should love his home.

The topmost floor of the house had been uninhabited when the family had lived below. Emil had discovered then that if he climbed up the wooden stairs that clung to the outside of the house and got in through the shattered woodwork of a glassless side window, he could go through the bedroom to a 39

special place right in the arch of the gable. The tiny curved window, with its white frame and clear oval panes, jutted out between the two empty and forgotten bedrooms. The bedrooms themselves, with ceilings pressed into crazy angles by the shifting mass of down-bearing slates, and the tiny tracks of trapped birds speckled into the dust underfoot, were too desolate to be comfortable, but between them lay a brief oasis of sunlight. Here, with his legs curled up almost to his chin, Emil would sit on the heavy wooden chest of drawers below the window and bask in the afternoon sun that hit the rear of the house. The drab garden below, with its withered laurel trees, had not hindered his enjoyment, and at times an animal, a dog or a cat, or something red, quick and indeter-minate, something not in his books, would run between the houses. Here, he had felt connected with the world outside as he had never done on his brief excursions into the cobbled streets.

Last night, the key of the house fresh-cut in his pocket, he had slept again in that private place. He had even, although he had the key and could have climbed the interior staircase, approached it in the old way. He felt at home again, at last.

The closet was tight and hot. The tiny space was full of richly mouldering clothes and the turpentine and paint that she had not noticed earlier. Some paintings lay wedged into the narrow space, their blank backs outwards, their subjects hidden against the wall.

Roz pressed her right eye to the keyhole and thought of what she would have to do to Chris if he ever learnt that she had let herself be bundled into a cupboard. It was just the sort of thing h e ' d find amusing.

'But I don't want to see a doctor.' David was being petulant and childish, and Claudette was rapidly losing her temper.

'Doctor August Mirakle is no ordinary doctor, David.

Everyone who's anyone goes to see him.'

'Really, so to be anyone you have to be mad? Is that what you're saying? Or is it just that you think I ' m cracked?'

'No, that's not what I ' m saying. You just need to rest, to have different interests. To get out of this house, get out of yourself more.' Roz could hear Claudette's teeth gritting. Her voice was getting

slower, with an angry patience that her parents' human servants had probably once reserved for her.

Roz wondered if that was how she sounded to Chris. She hoped not.

'I am not going to see Doctor Mirakle,' said David forcefully. 'That's final. Absolutely and utterly final.' Roz did not bother listening to the rest of the argument. It was already clear David had lost. Instead she took a finger-length torch from her bag and eased a painting out from the wall, tilting it at an angle so she could look down on the picture.

She supposed it was effective. It was certainly striking.

Utterly unlike the formal portraiture or geometric landscapes that had hung, would hang, in the Baronial Estate on Io, and which were art's reaction to a millennium of image-storage technology and FX. It was a slew of colour and shapes that blended into a depiction of a shop, in front of which something white and tiny, a baby or a doll, crawled. The frontage of the shop was a wash of blue over gold letters. Roz could not read French, but after a second the words twisted and resolved themselves into the neat script of her childhood African. 'Monsieur Montfalcon's Most Marvellous Mechanical Men & Other Puppetries,' she read. Ordinarily the Time Lord gift that let her speak French or Ancient English did not extend to written translations. She was trying to work out if this was part of the Doctor's 'psychic fall-out' when the stubborn harsh silence of a finally lost argument reached her, seconds before the flat's door slammed. She dropped the painting without a moment's hesitation and flung the closet door open.

The narrow stairs would give no cover if she tried to follow them that way. Claudette would know she'd been in David's room. Roz could not care less about offending the sharp-faced society flirt, but if she embarrassed David h e ' d cease to trust her and become difficult, suspicious. Intract-able. She opened the wooden shutters of the attic window 41

cautiously, and looked across the rooftops. Tight red tiles.

Steep, but not impossible. She squeezed through the narrow window and ran along the ridge of the roof. If she could get to one of the lower balconies and then across to the next building, she could get down its stairs. From the corner of her eye she caught a yellow glimpse of David's scarf in the street below. A banner in the wind. Goddess! They were out of the apartment already, heading up the slightly sloping road toward the river. Swearing under her breath, Roz leant forward

and grabbed at the guttering that ran along the roof edge. It creaked ominously as she bent forward, testing whether it would hold her weight. The sensible thing would be to go back. She knew the name of the doctor they were going to see. No one expected her to do acrobatics.

No one but her. She was three balconies down and a building across before she caught another breath. Smooth.

Except it wasn't. She was going to ache for a week, and if she had tried that in a fire fight she would have been chargrilled.

She was getting old.

David and Claudette were turning the corner at the end of the street. Roz kicked in the door of the balcony and ran through the apartment beyond to the staircase. The couple making love on the bed did not even notice her. She noticed them just long enough to memorize the position. If that did not keep her limber, nothing would. Of course it might be a while before she got to try it out.

Chapter 3

Doctor August Mirakle, who advertised himself as a doctor of the body, mind and spirit, held court in an ugly red brick house on the rue Visconti opposite the Academie du Medecine. He had chosen the location deliberately to imply that the medical academy beamed approvingly upon his activities. Privately, he judged that the site repaid its exorbitant rent four times over in custom even before the silk-screen printed testimonials and the support of his sponsors were taken into account.

All the nobility and the political elite paid handsomely for his attentions, but he also, for his sins, worked with the poor and the ragged, and his sponsors were quite determined that he should continue to do so. The people in whom they were interested were not only to be found in the ranks of the inner circles of government.

Dr Mirakle considered an art student, even one connected with the Engadine family, to fall firmly in the class of charitable work. When a client from that class was the first of the day it soured his whole disposition. It made it more likely he would have to contact his sponsors. So it was with teeth fixed in a pained smile that was meant to be avuncular, and disdain only half-hidden behind his half-moon spectacles that he began his usual mixture of Christian Science self-help, pharmaceutical encouragement and practical mesmerism.

'Tell me about your problems, my friend.'

'I came to you because of my dreams,' the young man with 43

the American accent said defiantly. 'You were recommended to me.'

Mirakle glanced at the note his receptionist had passed to him. 'Ah yes, by Mademoiselle Engadine. Such a charming lady. Such an asset to her family.'

The American - the note said his name was David -

winced slightly. ' I ' m meeting her later,' he said defensively.

Mirakle judged he was smarting from the brisk kiss on the cheek and wave he had been given by the mademoiselle when she had left him at the doorway of Mirakle's consulting rooms. Mirakle had seen that, peeking from behind the drapes in the bay window of the study; it often paid to have as much practical information about a patient as

possible. A failing love affair was worth gold to him. Usually.

This time he felt a growing unease as he questioned his new patient. There was nothing physical to account for this. David was a dark-haired stripling, no brighter than the average street Apache or politician. Yet there was something different about him. Evidence of muscles only neglected rather than never developed? A strength awaiting exercise? A potential athlete, Mirakle judged, ruined by introspection and by confining his life to the horizons of a cork-lined room. He moved his comfortably corpulent form as if in sympathy, raising a creak of protest from the armchair from which he regarded the patient. Well, he would have exercise soon enough if Augustus Mirakle had anything to do with it.

'What sort of dreams?' He fixed his best mesmeric gaze upon the lad.

In the tiny, cluttered reception room, Roz pressed the end of the sonic sensor against the partition wall, and ignored the muffled noise from over her shoulder. Mirakle's blonde receptionist was not enjoying her introduction to the Roz Forrester closet experience.

The long, severe, straight streets of Paris did not make it easy to trail people unseen. Claudette and David were young, white and attractive, natural cutters through nineteenth-century crowds. No one had shown any inclination to get out of Roz's 44

way. Her right shoulder was bruised from barging through street riff-raff. She had not arrived in a subtle or diplomatic mood.

The thick, self-satisfied voice of Claudette's pet doctor boomed out of the earplug. Under its oily intonation Roz thought she heard something familiar. It was fear.

' I ' d like you to have lunch with a friend of mine and, incidentally, of Claudette's. He is a member of a lay brotherhood that has had some good results in calming the shakes of addicts of opium and absinthe. I would sooner you saw him than returned to me for a nerve tonic, is that clear? His address is on this card, his name is Brother Tomas. I'll write you a brief letter of introduction if you wait a moment.'

Goddess! Roz dropped the sensor, and lunged at the receptionist's desk. Where did they keep addresses? KeyPADD? A hundred years too soon. On a bit of squashed tree? Yes. She flipped through the card index. 'Brother Tomas' was a trap, of course. Mirakle sounded as false as any criminal she had ever interrogated, but then she'd already made her decision when she'd let David leave the flat with Claudette.

'Keep him away from anything unusual,' the Doctor had said, but Roz knew that was not the role fate had planned for the artist. He was not a suspect or a witness. He was a judas goat, a lure. The Doctor was obviously intending, when the board was well set up, to use him to persuade the source of the psychic fall-out to come out into the open where he could deal with it. Well, David could be her lightning conductor as easily as the Doctor's. Of course she'd have to arrange back-up. Going in alone was as bad as not going in at all. A note to Chris should do the trick, courtesy of the Prefecture of Police. She slipped the card into her bag. This time she would get there first.

After David left, Mirakle poured himself a glass of medicinal bitters. He felt drained and useless. He hated this kind of consultation.

Particularly when the results were positive. David was a class three latent on Tomas' patiently worked-out scale. Too 45

dangerous to be allowed to join with Montague's forces. Not without seeing Tomas first, at any rate. Mirakle had little confidence in Tomas' plans but anything, however risky, that worked against that madman was worth trying. They had nothing to lose, but David and his sort were becoming very common. There were, after all, a dozen like the boy in the garrets of the Artists' Quarter.

That was a shuddersome thought.

Mirakle grimaced with pain and bent his fingers into the quick flick of the sign. It would have hurt less if he had been of the same species as its first users. There are kinds of body language that humans are not built to emulate. It would have reassured him more if he had found it to have power against Montague's creatures. Sorcery was almost dead, now.

Perhaps he was worrying unduly. It was understandable that certain things were showing in dreams. In the mystic realms Paris must look as if the World Fair had erected the vast lamp proposed by Eiffel's competitors that would have illuminated the whole city. If he could dream himself he would doubtless confirm the fragmentary glimpses that these decadent paint splashers were daubing across Paris. Possibly it was best that he had lost that particular ability years ago.

Feeling the heavy sweaty jowls of his face thoughtfully, August hoped for a less worrying patient. A nice honest deviant, perhaps. Why, only yesterday the Mademoiselle Delacroix had been telling him candidly about the beastly English practices her lovers demanded. It had all

been singularly refreshing. Idly he wondered what Tomas would make of Mademoiselle Delacroix. The thought gave him a tinge of pleasure.

'He laughed at me.' David's expression was rueful as he sipped at the bitter coffee Claudette had bought him, outside the cafe. Most of the people sitting and watching the passers-by were foreigners. The cost of a coffee here was exorbitant, but the flowers in the shop-fronts, expensively reared in hot-houses or cut daintily out of coloured paper and ribbons, defied the winter chill.

'I am sure le docteur Mirakle did no such thing,' Claudette scolded, tapping David playfully on one knee. 'We must trust others if we wish to gain trust, David.'

'Really, he did,' said David wishing that had come out sounding less petulant than it had. What had he ever seen in the girl anyway? When he wanted her to be serious she was flirty, and when he wanted her to flirt all she would do was quote her holy man's latest aphorism. He hoped Roz was all right. Had the closet locked when he shut it? Was she suffocating?

'Poor b o y ' Claudette smiled, patting the squirming David on his dark hair.

David smiled back, restraining an almost overpowering urge to hit her. He was not a child, for heaven's sake. The urge, almost a compulsion, tightened the muscles in his forearms. He reached for the bottle of table wine.

In a flash of ultraviolet intensity he broke it on the table, slashing the jagged glass edge across her throat, opening his mouth in a scream of rage that gaped to catch the spray of naked red blood that gushed from her whiteness. The vivid light died into a moment that was grey as a blank slate. The grey unbroken bottle trembled in his pearly hand. Claudette smiled at him. With an answering smile that felt inside like a death-mask he finished pouring her drink. The image made his hand shake, and the red table wine - Claudette abhorred white wines - spilled over the table-cloth. He ran from the table.

As the waiter came to mop up the wine, Claudette paid the bill and, still smiling to herself, pushed her chair under the table and followed David, taking care to keep out of sight. It was not difficult. He was ploughing on forcefully. His head was thrust forward, neither looking to right nor left, and certainly not looking back. It was obvious that he

was going to Brother Tomas. Poor boy, he had looked so frightened.

Still, it was for his own good. If anyone could help him, Brother Tomas could.

Roz found Brother Tomas's house on the rue des Tournelles, not far from the so-called Jewish Quarter, at the heart of Le 47

Marais. On the way she'd seen broken windows in kosher butchers and slogans scrawled on walls. Since the supposed treason of Dreyfus, the popular press had been baying for the Jews. Krystallnacht looked like coming early.

The house was imposing but run-down, an aristocratic remnant of the previous century from before the migration of the nobility to St-Germain. Despite its years it looked too grand for a member of a 'lay brotherhood'.

She looked for a way round to the back; for a way to break in.

In the sunlight Emil's light, almost colourless hair darkened perceptibly, as did the white skin of his chubby face with its small translucent ears. It was with a healthy outdoor coun-tenance that he climbed down the interior stairs to the ground floor and the rooms that had belonged to his parents. Such changes were still outside his control, but he had mastered the wild shifts in physiognomy that had marked his childhood. If he was angry now, claws no longer burst from shredded fingertips. If he was unhappy now, he no longer signalled it so intensely that any Family member could sense his gloom a mile off, like a black obsidian-tipped pin thrust into a map of Paris.

The powers were still there, however, and he controlled them like a man struggling to lead a pack of hounds that might turn on him at any moment. Coming to the bottom of the stairs, he breathed again the air of the ground floor apartment where he had lived as a child, and for a moment relaxed his control as he surrendered to the feeling of nostalgia. In a second he realized his mistake. The power within him, pressing always at any point where his self-built defences were weak, seized on his desire. The world faded into a waking memory.

His mother, sitting working at her spinning-wheel in the parlour, smiled at him as he went past. She was always kind whereas his father could be gruff at times, even violent, but somehow Emil had known - since he could not remember when - that if he had to offend one of his parents it was best 48

to offend his father. There was something about his mother, something that showed perhaps in the slow but utterly certain weave and woof of her cloth-making, that brooked no opposition.

Then something happened. No. He did not remember it like this. *His father's anger. Fire. His father screaming as he ran.* In the future, the memories ran boiling into his brain from the fabric of the house as his power absorbed the residual psychic traces buried in the walls. *From her spinning-wheel, Emil's mother saw the skin on her husband's face pucker like a crepe on the stove, and a stench of fat and burning hair cling sickeningly within her nostrils. Moving in one determined act she pulled the half-finished shawl for which she had been spinning thread from the top of the little pile of clothes beside her where it lay, and flung it over his head. The fire, though, refused to be smothered. Uncanny as a ghost, it burst in thin slivers of light through the weave of the cloth. He started to moan in a high tone worse than any scream, and she did not have to look up to know that the few ornaments on the high shelves along the hallway were jumping and trembling in time to his shaking body. The quiet footfalls of her son sounded behind her. Without releasing the burning shawl that she clasped to her husband, she turned enough to see the boy's horrified, inhumanly wide eyes.*

'Make it better!' he pleaded. 'Please, mama.'

Her hands tightened on the cloth. She could not bear it.

Inside her head a white light consumed the world. The ribbon of the world bent and was cut anew. And twelve years later, remembering in the same house, Emil saw himself through his mother's eyes, and for the second time his mind was bent by her power, as the world was bent. Two sets of contradictory memories fought in his brain.

Inside the workshop his father, a bulky man, was hammer-ing something down, the trapdoor to the cellar perhaps.

Occasionally a 'Merde!' or a 'Sapristi!', words Emil was not supposed to use or even know, drifted from the room. They were followed almost at once by a muffled crashing sound from the workshop as something heavy, a spokeshave or a 49

wooden mallet, was thrown forcibly across the room. His father was having one of his tantrums. Hard on his curses, his father stuck his head out of the workshop, a puzzled sheepish look on his face that Emil could not account for.

'Ah, Emil,' he said, motioning the boy into the workshop.

A franc glinted in his hand. 'Go out and buy yourself a candied apple, and when you return we will play a game.'

Emil took the coin willingly enough, although his father's tone surprised him. Where had his anger gone? He decided to buy a candied apple from the stall in the square with the bluebird fountain. He had gone out of the house then, into the trap set by the Brotherhood. That had really happened. The other things? They had really happened too. Then they had not.

In the long hoped-for sanctuary of his recovered childhood, Emil Montfalcon burst into tears.

Roz dropped down from the high wall around the house's back garden, into a mound of scented leaves. An insect brushed against her ear. Flowers - Roz struggled to remember the name of the wretched things - grew in profusion: scarlet; yellow; and jet black.

Chris paced around the room. Outside, a bird sang. Outside, Paris stretched in the leisurely, unseasonable sunlight. Somewhere Monet, his eyesight failing, began to dream of painting waterlilies. Somewhere Toulouse-Lautrec, dead drunk in a flop-house, dreamed of watching dancers kick their legs high in the air. The whole city smelt unusually alive, more vital and intense than anywhere he had ever been, and he had nothing to do but wait and read up on politics. Sometimes he wondered if his sense of duty was as strong as his family had always said it was. It would be so easy just to go out for a walk. No one would care. Jean Mayeur's death probably did not even have anything to do with the psychic flux and the time-rifts. In the city he might find a real lead. He was not getting anywhere here. His reading had taken him up to the beginning of 1894 and he still did not even know what the 50

Dreyfus case was. Sighing, he started to look round Anton Jarre's office again.

It was like every office in the new wing of the Prefecture building. It achieved the paradox of smelling strongly of fresh paint without appearing to have been decorated. The ceiling was flat and drab without any mouldings or cornices, and the walls were a mottled white tainted with an underlying hint of some other colour.

It was the simple things you missed once you left your own era, Chris decided. At home he could have thumbclicked a sensor on the wall and reset the colour. Okay, Adjudicator dorms had only a very limited

palette range but at least options would have been available. Nothing here showed any sign of having been customized. He had hoped that there would be something to let him gauge his superior officer's personality, but the room was bare. Evidently Inspector Jarre had not yet stamped his character on the room. The general feeling was that of the interior of a box.

No one seemed to have seen the inspector this morning and Chris had not yet met him, but he got the strong impression that everyone else knew something about Jarre that he did not, and they were not talking. They were, however, definitely keeping away from this part of the building. That meant his presence here was unwitnessed. He examined the desk more closely. It was well made and imposing, almost grandiose, but it was completely out of place in the room. Like putting a concert holo-rig in a back bedroom, the effect was to make the room seem even smaller.

Taking his freshly laundered handkerchief from his uniform's breast pocket, he ran it through the bronze handle of one of the desk drawers and tugged. Locked. Why lock an empty desk?

He took a flat leather wallet from his inside pocket and unfolded a vibropick-lock he had confiscated from an Undercity Delta-grade during a training exercise that had got real, real quick. A nineteenth-century desk lock should be easy to pick.

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David stopped outside Brother Tomas's house and unfolded the letter Mirakle had written for him. Mirakle had impressed him as the sort of man who would find it amusing to send a patient off with an insulting message about himself, but the letter was innocent enough. 'Monsieur Clayton has a problem with dreams,' it read. I trust that you will be able to assist him to make best use of his reason and abilities, and ensure that they are not misused.' It ended with a Bible reference: Daniel 4:16.

David shrugged. His family in Boston had a great New England Bible chained in the library, but its contents had never interested him. No doubt the reference was to some platitude or well-meaning nonsense.

He banged on the bronze door-knocker.

The man who answered the door was far older and balder than anyone, even a lay brother, had any right to be. He was also taciturn to the point of imbecility, and though he ushered David into the

garden at the back of the big house, he neither acknowledged David's request to meet Brother Tomas, nor denied it.

In the garden, however, David felt some of the panic that had gripped his heart ebb gently away. The winter sun shone here with a summery intensity, and drowsy bees hovered around the earliest of next year's blooms, deluded as to the season. The garden recalled the one at his family home in Boston, and at that instant David felt sure that if he had only heard a voice speaking in an American accent he would burst into tears.

When the man in m o n k ' s robes put his hand on David's shoulder, he almost fainted.

Roz watched as the man in the ancient outfit - Brother Tomas, she presumed - took David by the hand and led him to a wooden seat between the house and a building that stood between some trees. Its architecture was ornate and she judged it was a chapel. Either that or the world's most elaborate outside toilet.

They talked for some time, and Brother Tomas read something that David passed to him. They were too far away for 52

her to be able to lip-read. Then Brother Tomas took something small out of the pocket of his robes. A mechanism? A weapon? It was too small to make out. David's body went into spasms, throwing him back off the seat.

A weapon, then. His limbs twisted and bent. Breaking? No, changing. Legs lengthened, strengthened, tearing through his fashionable baggy trousers. His knee joints buckled; reversed like a bird's. Roz winced, imagining the sound of tendons tearing and re-knitting. He seemed to be trying to scream. Nothing came out of his throat, at first. Then something did. Roz thought it was his tongue.

She took the gun out of her handbag. It looked unreassuringly alien. Far-future technology, the Doctor had said, way beyond your time. Absolutely un-reproducible by nineteenth-century science. Guaranteed to stop any known psychic force dead. Nothing about its likely effects on monks with mutagenic weaponry.

Shit!

Pleased with his work, Tomas replaced the tiny doll's-house chair into the black wooden box in the hidden pocket in his robes from which he had taken it. His silver tweezers went into a flat wallet in the same

pocket. Montague and his creatures might let the power dwell permanently in their bodies, but he had seen the final results of that too often to take the risk.

David was growling. Flecks of foam and spit gathered on his distorted lips. His wide tracker's ears were twitching.

Tomas looked around the garden. Roses, berberis darwinii, laburnum and maple trees met his gaze. There was no visible threat. That meant nothing.

Tomas smiled. The power should have laid down the instructions in the boy's brain by now. He spoke a single word: 'Fetch.'

David's muscles tensed. The tactile pads that had grown out from the backs of his hands pressed into the soft earth.

The claws that curled up in the palms of his hands moistened with a thin liquid as modified sweat glands activated. He **53**

leapt towards the woman-shaped fire that burnt in his new eyes. A word slurred on his drooling lips: 'Rrrozzzz.'

He was on her before she could aim the gun. His body was unmercifully fast. Unmerciful to him too, she suspected.

Surely his bones could not stand the tug of such muscles?

His forearm smashed her across the face, razor hairs cutting the flesh under her eye. She tried a couple of standard blocking moves. It was like fighting a mechanical crop-picker. Each blow nearly shattered her arms. If this kept up, she was going to die. Battered to death in a garden in Paris, centuries before she was born. Killed without ever knowing why.

'Wait.' Brother Tomas's voice was cold as a mountain stream.

Confused by the blows she had not been able to block, Roz saw, as if in a dream, another older man, perhaps a servant, whisper in Tomas's ear.

'Take her into the chapel,' Tomas said to the thing that had been David Clayton. 'I'll deal with her later. And stay out of sight, your young lady is here. It wouldn't do for her to see you like this.'

Chapter 4

Augustus Mirakle flung the closet door wide open. His white-faced receptionist spilled out onto the floor, her blonde hair flooding over the floorboards. He ripped the gag from her lips. It was her stockings, which had been bundled up and thrust into her mouth. Her legs were bare.

'Who did this?' He did not bother putting any sympathy into his voice. He knew what this meant. They were after him. One faction or another wanted his head on a spike. He would have to talk with Brother Tomas. It was a pity that he was just as frightening as Mirakle's enemies.

Chris sighed. The photograph was crude by any standards.

Photography was still new and expensive. The woman was red-haired, he thought, although it was hard to tell in sepia.

Not as attractive as she might once have been, perhaps. The two children were bright and happy. Cute as a bepple, both of them. He felt vaguely guilty, and pushed the drawer shut with a pencil.

This was so frustrating. Roz and the Doctor got all the interesting jobs.

He decided to go and see if the Doctor had sent him a message. They had arranged another way to keep in touch as well, but Chris still had not managed to believe in it. Pending an emergency or an important discovery, he was going to stick to paper.

In the church of St Cecile in the thirteenth arrondissement, 55

the second morning service was over. Father Patrick cleared away the fragments of the Eucharist. The sun shone through the stained glass behind the high altar. It was a beautiful day.

Cold but sunny, with a crystalline feeling in the air. He was happy.

'Father , wil l yo u hea r m y confession? ' Th e voic e cam e suddenly at his elbow. He jumped slightly. He had thought himself alone in the church after Madame Duclare's depar-ture, and had not heard the footsteps of another parishioner.

Turning, he saw an untidy-looking man with a battered hat clasped firmly across his chest.

The man's eyes were strange. No - why had he thought that?

- they were normal. It must be his voice that was strange. Most people came to confession nervously, even when their guilt was hardly noticeable. Small venal sins normally, thank God. The parish had been spared the violence that was brewing in the city.

This man's voice was confident, and yes, kind. Father Patrick found himself being led to the confessionals.

'Is it long since your last confession?' he asked, a formal breaking of the silence in the dark of the curtained and incensed air.

'This is my first. At least, my first in your church.'

'And what is your sin, my child?' Strictly, as this was a first confession of a non-parishioner, possibly of a non-Roman Catholic if the voice's stress on the word 'church'

had been intentional, Father Patrick knew that he should have asked if the man was interested in baptism or confirmation, but he felt an urgency in the man's voice that made him want to proceed. If the man was suffering he should be helped at once, not be held at arm's-length from God by formalities.

I am about to hurt someone.' The voice had the finality of a funeral bell. There was a pause. Patrick felt a cold fear move in his throat, and rubbed absently at his scarred cheek.

He had heard of cases of criminals who bragged of their crimes under the seal of confession, tormenting priests with evils done or about to be done. He considered demanding that the man leave his church, but before he could compose himself the voice began again.

'There are people who see things, who feel things, but who cannot live with what they see and feel. Rather than do so, they retreat from the experience. Some in one way, some in another.' The voice was sad, but it seemed an impersonal sorrow. Patrick tried to see how this related to its owner being about to hurt people. Perhaps this was a true confession; a real attempt to avert a horror foreseen.

'Last night I spoke with such a man. He had been made to investigate something that terrified him. Then his reaction was deemed unusual. Worthy of study. He was locked away.

Like the other secrets.'

'Is it this man that you are going to hurt?' Father Patrick tried to break into the man's musings, to direct him back to confession. This talk of secrets was disturbing. There was no place for them before God. Father Patrick devoutly wished to believe that.

'No. I left him sleeping peacefully, but he told me things that had been collected over years. Odd murders, strange disappearances. Dates and names, and aliases. He told me of a witness who had been released years ago. He told me where to find him now. I think he spoke so freely to keep from saying something else. I'll need to go back there, but no, he is not the man I have to hurt. I ' m sorry.'

The feeling of cold foreboding returned to Father Patrick.

Was this man hunting down an old enemy? Seeking revenge for an ancient wrong? 'If you are here to confess, then do so.

It is not a confession to brag of a crime not yet committed.'

'Forgive me Father, for I must make a man face things he has forgotten, and does not even know he has forgotten.'

'If recovering these memories would help others, would not a Christian choose to remember, if the choice was left to him? Do not confess, but seek permission openly, and if it is refused seek elsewhere.'

'Do you really believe that a Christian would choose to remember, Father?'

'I do.'

"Then speak to me of what you saw, Father Patrick, when you went by another name, in the crypt of the Église St Roch.

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Tell me what sent you back to the church of your childhood, and to the veneration of the saint who drove the serpents out of Ireland.'

A cold hand seemed to twist in Father Patrick's intestines.

His lower jaw felt heavy and ill-fitting. In his head a set of barred doors were opening.

'I never went back to them, I swear it. I never harmed the child.'

"Then tell me what you did see, Brother Viers. Then perhaps we can grant each other absolution.'

Brother Tomas snipped a blue-black rose from a bush with his dainty silver secateurs, and ran a slim finger along the supple velvet darkness of the petals. He did not rise from the wicker chair to do it, and his movements had, to Claudette's eyes, a practical economy that spoke of spiritual calm. The sun shone down on his garden like a beam from the lighthouse at Alexandria, or the light that shone from the faces of the Muses upon Delphi. Claudette, despite her dislike for traditional religious poetry, felt like quoting Browning.

Tomas's beautiful voice, clear as a temple bell, forestalled her:

' ' T h e lark is on the wing, the snail is on the thorn, God's in his Heaven, all's right with the world.'"

The casual mind-reading was only what Claudette had expected, for the master, while not of course prone to the weakness which in ordinary mortals would be showing-off, did not allow a chance to pass in which his wisdom could cast its holy shadow, which was pure light, on the minds of his followers. His voice set a longing loose in her brain. A need for who knew what? More than David had to offer her, she felt sure.

She had expected to find David here, sitting at the master's feet. Now, however, she was not sorry that he was nowhere in sight.

'This is the beauty we strive for,' Brother Tomas said in his genderless voice. 'It took five days' concentration to **58**

weave the changes that will make this flower breed true. Now the bush can be left to bloom, and the world has become richer and more strange.'

His voice changed, becoming a command. 'Take it.'

Claudette reached for the flower. This was the living art that she had sought so long. In her haste, a thorn nestling just below the rose pierced her hand. A dizziness worse than the spell she had woven on David that morning for his own good burst through her.

Tomas's voice came softly into her paralysed ears. 'There is a later verse of that poem of Browning's that's even more appropriate, my

dear.

' "All service ranks the same with God -

With God, whose puppets, best and worst Are we; there is no best nor first."

'It is time for your service to enter a new mode.'

Jarre met Picquart at the railway station. Georges Picquart saluted crisply as Jarre approached.

The shorter man snorted. 'It's me, Anton Jarre, remember?

You're my commanding officer; you don't have to salute me.'

'I was your commanding officer, until the Tribunal reported.

Now I'm off to command a mud barracks in Tunisia, and you've been seconded to the Gendarmerie. I'll write and we can compare notes on who's deeper in the *merde."*

Jarre found himself blushing. Georges had never used bad language in all the time he had commanded the International Espionage Section of the French Secret Service. Jarre swore often, at least on duty, but it was somehow shocking to hear Picquart do so. Perhaps it was because, especially in the black civilian suit with a high white collar, he looked more like a preacher than a soldier.

'I wanted to see you before you went, Georges.' Jarre stumbled over the words. In the five years he had served under Picquart he had never called him by his first name, 59

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only 'sir' or ' C o l o n e l ' . Neither seemed appropriate now.

Picquart spoke quickly: "That's very kind, Anton. But perhaps it's best if I just fade away. No one's going to get any points from backing me up, not after Esterhazy's testimony.'

'I know. But I still had to come. There's something you need to know before you go. I don't want to waste time thanking you for trusting me when I came to you and said that I didn't think Dreyfus was selling military secrets to the Germans, whatever Joseph Henri claimed to have discovered.

That's a given. You trusted me and I ' m grateful, but I want to say don't write to me, and don't contact me again. I have a wife, you don't. I have two children. I can't afford to be a martyr, Georges. You do see that? Dreyfus is in Devil's Island prison. Our careers are in ruins. No one's got anything coherent out of Agent Gris since that business at Mont-St-Michel. The hidden cause is over, at least in France. We have to let it go, Georges. Let others hold the secret flame for once.'

Georges turned away. 'I see,' he said neutrally. They stood for another ten minutes in silence while the train was made ready, and then Picquart got on it. He went straight to a seat in the carriage and sat down. He did not look out of the window. The train pulled out in a cloud of evil-smelling steam and oil.

After it had gone, Jarre swore under his breath. That had been nasty, but it was for the best. Edouard Drumont's vile paper *La Libre Parole* was digging into the background of everyone involved in the Dreyfus case, especially anyone who might have Jewish blood in his veins. Picquart was a good officer, a solid career soldier; he might live down his support of Dreyfus if he kept quiet. He might even live down his involvement with the body Dreyfus had represented, the shadow agency within the French intelligence community into which Jarre and Dreyfus had been recruited during their studies at the Écolee Polytechnique in 1883.

Picquart had been initiated only into the outer 'onion-skin' of the shadow agency; his control over it had been **60**

nominal. Jarre had been next after Dreyfus. Had that been why Picquart had saluted him at the last? It was too late to tell now. Jarre was one order deeper into the mysteries, and like Dreyfus he had Jewish blood. He was the next obvious target for whichever group was out to wreck the Shadow Directory, but he was not going to be discredited or killed so easily. Not if he could kill the enemy first.

Roz stared out of bruised eyes, across the truncated nave of the chapel. David was roosting - she could find no better word to describe it - on the pulpit, his head resting on its side on the great flat reading stand. One of his eyes was open and unblinking.

Tomas entered the chapel. With him, like a sleep-walker, came Claudette Engadine. Roz had seen her at La Belle Epoch, and she had been beautiful there. Now she would, Roz judged, be fabulously attractive to a certain sort of man.

Her breasts had grown larger and firmer, her skin whiter and clearer. Her eyes were large and childlike. They half-filled her forehead. Vast, deep, elven eyes. Roz wondered what good they were. Beyond a certain size there was no func-tional need to make the eye much bigger. A whale's eye is not massively bigger than a human's. Then she remembered a craze from her own time: Neotic Make-up. Cosmetic altera-tions designed to make the features resemble those of a helpless infant, to evoke feelings of maternal or paternal love. It had always made her want to kick the designer in the genes.

Tomas patted Claudette on the shoulder. 'Sit down, my dear.'

Obediently she sat on the edge of a pew, hands clasped in her lap like a little girl in church for the first time.

Tomas turned to face Roz.

'Now, what in the world am I going to do with you?'

When Jarre arrived at work he found his new assistant chatting idly with the desk sergeant in the main building. The new man was clearly ill-disciplined. He just stood there 61

grinning like an idiot, as if Jarre's arrival had saved him from some horrible fate.

Jarre tried to work out just why the gendarme was so irritating. He had the frank weather-beaten look of a farmer or a groundsman, and wore his neatly pressed and apparently newly issued gendarme's uniform as a novice monk in a strict order might have worn his first hair-shirt. He was big, over six foot, and built out to match. His blond hair was cropped close.

Jarre, an always overweight five foot eight, felt a twinge of envy. But he didn't let himself feel it for long. The mixture of innocence and smugness turned his stomach. It also rang as true as a coiner's fifty-franc piece. It was hard to be properly scornful of someone who loomed over him, but Jarre did his damnedest.

'I've had no time to familiarize myself with your record.'

He glanced at the duty rosters. *Oh hell.* 'I have a meeting in five minutes with the Prefect of Police, on the Mayeur case.

Tell me about yourself as we go. Oh, and I'll expect you to take minutes, all right?'

'There's not that much to tell, Inspector,' the man said quickly. 'My name's Jean-Paul Armand, and I've been transferred from the French Alps to gain some experience of city policing.' He stopped and looked unaccountably pleased with himself.

'Indeed. So street crime is rife in the Alps, is it?'

'No, Monsieur Inspector.'

Jarre sighed. This was a punishment, he knew. Jean-Paul was evidently the slowest, stolidest, least quick-witted officer in the whole of France, carefully hand-picked as a living ball and chain to keep Anton Jarre out of trouble and away from the Dreyfus business. Well, h e ' d see about that. As soon as the meeting was over h e ' d have Jean-Paul assessed for fitness, marksmanship and legal knowledge. Something would give him the opportunity to get this yokel onto someone else's back. Jarre smothered a flash of guilt. It was in Jean-Paul's own interest to be moved. Very shortly, Jarre's company was not going to be healthy.

Chapter 5

' D o you like t h e m ? ' Tomas asked. 'I know they're gaudy.

Even obvious in a way, but they will be mingling in my service with creatures even more vulgar and debased.

Think of their degradation as the mimicry of an exquisite moth.'

He reached over and prised open Claudette's mouth.

'Good teeth. One of my few regrets; poor dental hygiene. If you ever have to grow a second set of teeth in adulthood, you'll know why.' He closed Claudette's mouth gently. ' S h e ' s a valuable addition to my flock, if perhaps a trifle past her best.' He sighed with apparently genuine disappointment with the unfairness of the world. 'It's a difficulty. Harvest too late and something is already lost; harvest too early and work in the world goes undone.'

Clicking his teeth in thought, like a farmer examining his stock, Tomas saw tears well up in the girl's eyes, and carefully wiped them away with an immaculate white linen handkerchief.

'There, there, my dear. It's not as bad as that. It's not as if I were Montague, you know. I pride myself on preserving beauty. Look at David here.'

The tears curved down the classical beauty of Claudette's face.

After Jarre and his stooge left the lobby, the desk sergeant took the envelope addressed to Armand from the cubbyhole under the desk and placed it in his pocket. Major 63

Henri would be interested to see who was trying to contact Armand, or more likely who was trying to contact Jarre.

The meeting with the Prefect went as well as Jarre had hoped, which was to say badly. Train a parrot to say 'crisis, what crisis', give it an ill-fitting drab suit so that it resembled a parrot in crow's clothing, and provide it with an uncle in the Senate, and you would have Jules Perraudin; civic leader and chief of police.

Armand had not helped matters by sitting there with his mouth open, taking no notes whatsoever.

Once Jarre had the man back in his office he rounded on the gendarme viciously. Inwardly he knew that he was only taking out the anger he had felt on being on the receiving end of Perraudin's septic tongue, but he was damned if he was going to be ignored by a subordinate.

'I told you to keep a record of the meeting.'

Armand looked puzzled. 'I did.'

'Really?' said Jarre with heavy sarcasm. 'I suppose you memorized everything the Prefect said.'

'Yes, Inspector. He began, if you will pardon me, by calling you an obsessive misanthrope with delusions of proficiency, then he said that Doctor Tardieu was an antique pox-doctor who should have been retired ten years ago, and that so far as he was concerned Jean Mayeur hung himself, or if he was murdered it was a public-spirited act carried out by a posse of concerned citizens and should be applauded. He went on to say that as far as contributing to the activities of the Surete goes, he would be happiest if you and -' Armand blushed '- your muscular dunce over there spent your time rogering each other in back rooms rather than investigating anything.'

Jarre scowled. 'Yes, well, I don't think there is any need to remember in quite so much detail. I want you to go to the department of records at the Palais Bourbon and read up the records of votes in the Council of Deputies in which Mayeur was involved. I want to know what he voted for and why over the last five years.'

Armand started to say something.

'And,' Jarre continued hurriedly, 'I want to know whether any of the other members of the Council of Deputies have changed their positions since his death.'

'In case he was influencing or blackmailing any of them, and they murdered him and then reverted to their real view-points?'

'Or in case a third party killed him to warn others or because he was less corruptible than most, which is perhaps slightly more likely.' Jarre sighed. 'And be as quick as you can. I expect to put you through your paces this afternoon.'

He winced. 'Professionally, of course.'

The department of records at the Palais Bourbon was sealed to the public, but Chris's police status got him inside. It smelt of brown paper parcels and librarians' hair-oil.

Jarre's suggested line of enquiry was a good one and it niggled at Chris that he had not thought of it a day before. It took him a couple of hours to trace the votes in the Council of Deputies through the labyrinthine processes of government but in the process he found himself intrigued, despite his earlier boredom. He also found out some snippets about the Dreyfus case although, mindful of Jarre's orders, he refused to let himself be diverted. Still, at least he knew now what Dreyfus had done. Treason and the sale of military secrets; no wonder the man was hated.

On arriving back at the Prefecture, Chris noticed that Jarre seemed surprised to see him for some reason despite his explicit instructions. However, he clearly anticipated action from his assistant since the very first thing he did after Chris's return was to make sure that his deputy could be relied on in a crisis. Chris approved of that. It showed forward planning.

He always tried to think ahead. For instance he used the time he spent doing the two hundred press-ups (one hundred with each hand) to review mentally the material he had gleaned on nineteenth-century Parisian law. As he had 65

suspected, there was a short quiz coming. Chris was just glad Jarre kept off recent history.

After the criminology test there was a trip to the firing range. Chris lost a percentage on the hand-guns until he had figured out how to make allowances for recoil. Most of the ordnance he had used as an Adjudicator was blaster-based or recoil-absorbing. Still, Jarre seemed impressed enough by ninety-seven per cent accuracy. Chris thought that lenient.

The target range was too simple. It did not fire back. It did not even move.

By the end of the day, Chris was feeling that he had made a good all-round showing. The only problem was he could not fathom why Inspector Jarre seemed so down in the mouth.

In the evening mist, the shadowy man whose name - for the moment -

was Jean Veber shivered in his coachman's black and silver livery, and watched his victim over the snorting forms of the dappled horses. The traitor's offspring was only a shadow through the fog, but Veber had managed to keep the horse and trap padding after him through the backways around the rue de Poissy since Emil had left his rendezvous at the house on the quai St-Bernard.

Now the murder was at hand, it came to Veber to wonder if he could go through with it. It was one thing to live off another's name; he had been doing that as long as he could remember. That was a minor sin, surely. It was quite another thing to take a life.

He tasted something acrid and unpleasant in the back of his throat. He wondered if they had drugged him in the initiation or if it was the effect of fear.

He could remember so little of the initiation. So little of anything. His mind was blank as the fog. In the clammy mist he felt half-formed, like the unfinished paintings on the wall of the house of the painter whose name he had stolen.

His hands, so large and ruthless as they had always seemed, shook as he prepared to tug on the reins.

Montague's hissing voice sounded in his ear.

'Kill us this whelp and anything you desire will be yours.'

The force of half-remembered desires rose up for a moment in his brain like the head of a cobra. He threw the horses into a gallop through the fog.

Across the street Emil Montfalcon threw his head round at the sound of the hoofs. His grey top hat toppled through the night air.

Two years ago, during a visit to Armentières, he had seen the Calais and Lille Express strike a tramcar, killing five people. He thought of that collision as the horses pounded towards him.

Nearer to him than the horses, as near as his breath and nearer, the Quoth of the lost colony pondered the collision of galaxies.

The Quoth called 'Truthseeker' was impressive, the surveyor had to concede that. Still it was young, barely fifty million patterns old, and

apart from the period of Shadow that had fallen across the colony thirty million patterns ago, it had no direct experience of the Blight.

Nevertheless it had accomplished much in the brief beginnings of its immortality. It had studied with the Oldest Inhabitants of the lost colony, diligently bending its body to catch the faint, slow reminiscences that gradually spread over their frozen forms. It had traced their history as far back as the memories of the Oldest Speaker. Back over four hundred million pattern-lifetimes to when the cluster in which the colony dwelt had split off from its greater parent, to wander lonely in the desolate voids. Back further, ten thousand billion patterns, to when the Quoth first came to these Clusters, fleeing the catastrophe of their past, and had founded the massive domain of Quoth Space. From that vast hub the parent Cluster had been colonized, from which in turn this Cluster had been settled. Somewhere in the cosmos, no doubt, Quoth Space yet existed, lost perhaps forever as the random motions of the Clusters sundered the Quoth one from another. The random motions, and the Blight and the Shadow that came with them.

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Truthseeker had discounted the fables, the mythology that the freezing memories of the Oldest had added to the events.

Like the surveyors who devoted their time to tracking the other Clusters, and coming if possible to an understanding of the wider cosmos, it was regarded as a hero by the Quoth of the colony.

It helped, of course, that its body was lithely formed, and its planes of communication were broad and expressive.

Waves of thought whipped over Truthseeker's surface faster than the sensors of its compatriots could decipher them.

Reputedly it had, several times, solved problems that had puzzled Quoth Thinkers since before its ancestors had left Quoth Space, almost a thousand billion pattern-lifetimes before, only to neglect to tell anyone of the solution until a chance pattern or sudden practical application had caused the subject to be raised. Its past was already a legend; its future a puzzle. Even though other titles were foreseen for it, it carried its birth name 'Truthseeker' with quiet dignity. The circumstances in which it would earn the name 'Warleader'

had not yet happened and were only dimly foreseen by those Quoth who could, by creating perceptive organs in the plane of one of their

time-like dimensions, perceive likely futures.

By analogy with games and certain artistic endeavours the idea of a leader was understandable, but the term 'war' was much debated. Perhaps, the surveyor thought, it would be a new form of game.

For the present, the potential Warleader was as respected, as liked, as any Quoth within the Cluster; and that, the surveyor thought ruefully, was the problem.

It was simply so much in demand that those Quoth whose interests lay in surveying and measuring the other Outer Clusters had been forced to wait a hundred thousand pattern-lifetimes for this discussion. Time they could ill afford to lose.

Only Truthseeker had the leverage with the Oldest Inhabitants to persuade them that the Quoth were in imminent danger.

<It is certain then?> Truthseeker asked when the methods and the results of the surveyors' studies were explained to it.

< Reasonably so. We surveyors have been studying this 68

distant Cluster since its course through the four macrodimensions began to intersect that of ours. There are mathematical problems with modelling events on such a long time-scale and at such a distance, but it is practically certain that the Cluster in which we dwell will be disrupted, maybe even stripped of its birthing matter, by collision with this larger rogue mass. >

<How long before our worlds are destroyed?)

< Approximately five hundred thousand pattern-lifetimes. >

< We must begin at once to build great engines to carry all the Quoth from this Cluster. We m u s t . . . > The patterns blazoned across Truthseeker's form faltered.

The surveyor started to withdraw from the commonality of space-time in alarm but it was too late. The Shadow swept over them. It was, perhaps, the worst attack since the Cluster had been settled, certainly the worst in the surveyor's lifetime.

It strove to reassert its own identity, but the screaming patterns of the Blight drove away its consciousness, drove it down into a hell of toil and unreason. Alien images. Feelings of intolerable fear. A pounding

pressure to act.

The hoofs of the first horse struck Emil with the sound of iron striking a bag of oatmeal. Blood splashed on the cobbles. His heart paused in its beating.

Elsewhere, in a room empty apart from a man, a chair and a thing out of nightmare, there was the sound of laughter. The cause was the information that mumbled out of the distorted hps of the nightmare that knelt on the floor, as the senses generated within its enlarged cranium reached out into the world, ignoring nothing, reporting everything, understanding nothing.

The man in the chair laughed again. The test had been interesting, and the result was astonishingly humorous. He reached for a list of names and held it close to his eyes. All the people listed were members of the Brotherhood, all were tall men with blue-grey eyes and large white hands. Three names were left: a doctor; a priest; and this novice, Veber. Montague 69

was sure one of the men on the list was the Grandmaster, the masked figure to whom, in theory, he owed allegiance and who, in fact, he intended to kill, finally and for the last time.

He ran his finger under each name in turn. Mirakle was a mere conjuror, a fat fraud with his prehistoric rituals and his garbled chants. Montague had seen real magick in his youth, before the rise of the rationalists. In the Paris chained and tamed by Haussmann's architecture, by the past triumphs of the Shadow Directory, Mirakle was no threat.

Tomas the priest was a strong possibility, but more inclined to horticulture than conspiracy.

Veber, now. Veber was an anomaly. His painting "The Doll-Maker' had hung in the exhibition for a week before any of his underlings had dared mention it to Montague.

He was still undecided about the fate of the one who had finally told him of it. Perhaps he had been overly strict. Still, it had been insulting. It showed, if Veber's own notes on the painting were to be believed, a madman. The face of the man was apparently - Montague himself saw no resemblance -

Montague's own.

At first he had been inclined merely to have the painter killed out of hand. Then he had begun to wonder. More and more of the recruits of the True Brotherhood, of *his* Brotherhood, were students or artists. It seemed as if the power that flowed from him into his followers lived best in the creative, the innova-tive. Perhaps the forces were intentionally drawing in the minds in which they could best thrive. Perhaps Veber would be a strong ally. Perhaps it was a trap all along; another of the Grandmaster's switches of identity, planned over years to let him continue to command the Brotherhood without ever facing Montague openly.

With that in mind Montague had drawn Veber into the Brotherhood. Had set him a harder task than any other initiate. It had been unlikely that the uncannily knowledge-able painter was more than an unusually gifted novice, but it had not hurt to make sure. That he had succeeded in killing one of the Family was astonishing.

Montague reached for a second list, a longer one. A

complex genealogy of linked names. What an inspiration it had been! How better to deal with Veber than to set him against one of the cursed Family? Whoever died, Montague won. The thought was so delicious, so true in every sense, that Montague could not help whispering it in the distorted single ear of his creature, his lips pressed close to the gross convolutions of the tympanic surface that curved up in a spiral over her long mad skull.

'Whoever dies, Montague wins.' He laughed again, and again. A pity she could not understand him, but then who could? Emil was dead. It had been a death sorely delayed.

It had been the boy's physical perfection that had broken his hold on the members of the Brotherhood who had become the Family. He should have died for that, but he had been lucky even as a child. Montague had never discovered who had killed Boucher. Still, better late than never, and it was not as if he had not enough time. His greatest fear these days was that his enemies might die of old age while he was distracted by a sunset or a beautiful concubine. He was stronger than ever. He would always grow stronger. The Family's theft of the Doll's House had not weakened him. Still chortling to himself, he coughed a little blood onto the tiled floor where it mixed with the

drool of his sensor.

He wondered if she was all right in the damp. Perhaps he would bring her some warm gruel to suck soon; she deserved it. In the meantime she would need more of his power. He pressed her toothless head down into the folds of his robe with a sigh and felt her nuzzle at his flesh.

He did not know if his powers could save him until the horses' hoofs had crushed his ribs and his heart had stopped beating. After that it was obvious.

He was suddenly looking down at his own body from the driver's seat of the trap. Someone else's bile welled up in his new throat. His old body looked different from this angle.

Seen from outside it was no more than eighteen; its dark frock-coat and grey trousers stained with blood and night 71

soil; the make-up he used to disguise his abnormal skin cracked and stained on his broken flesh.

As he watched through new eyes, his opera hat was crushed like an eggshell under the hoofs of the still snorting horses. All the things that he had hated in himself, all the peculiarities and oddities that marked him as an outsider, as one of the Family rather than as a Frenchman, were dead and broken in the half-shuttered lights of the cab's oil lamps.

Perhaps if he had dreamed of this he would have imagined that a dark exultation would fill his veins when all that had cursed him was wiped away, but instead he felt only a great and dizzying hollowness, as if he had ceased to be real.

Somehow he knew he had no time to think, that if he did not master this new body, if he did not grasp its brain and biceps alike and grind his image into it, then he would be overwhelmed by the hollowness around him and die a second death, this time for ever.

He had to get down from the seat of the trap. He had to get his bearings. More than either he had to make the body act; to make it recognize him as master.

The street swayed before eyes whose retinas refused to obey him and, with a reflex that was for this first time wholly willed, his new large white hand seized the sweaty reins.

Unlike the hand itself, the reins felt completely real. It was enough. His eyes focused.

Luckily the rue de Poissy was empty. Luckily! They could hardly have tried to kill him in the first place if it had been crowded. His head ached. He guessed that the pounding in his skull was the last vestige of the killer's mind. Did that make him a murderer? Or could it be self-defence to swamp another person's brain so strongly with your personality that you, more truly than him, lived within his head thereafter? It was hard to think clearly. The science, even the morality of it could wait.

It was hard getting down. Emil scraped the driver's knee against the ornate brass handles of the passenger door. For an assassin, the body felt pain strongly. Emil guessed h e ' d ache for days, assuming the body didn't reject him. He wished he 72

knew more about this power. This use of it had not even been hinted at in his father's talks about the Family. They had been full of his duty to his cousins and the others, but always secretive about what mattered; how the power could be lived with, how it could be reined down to a normal life. He imagined that this leap was rare - or he would have heard of it - and perhaps a function of the same adaptability that made, had made, him an albino at night and a Negro at noon.

He hoped he was well rid of that. One or other would have been tolerable but the see-sawing between them and the other physical changes the power had granted him the ability to make were, he hoped, well lost.

He picked up his corpse with surprisingly little effort, almost toppling over backwards. Ashamed, he realized that his new body - the assassin's body - was strong and well made, and his old body had been light and raw-boned.

He put his body in the empty trap. An oddly gruesome reverence flooded through him, like nothing else in his experience except the memories that had come back to him in the house on the rue Morgue. He could not face returning there.

He forced himself to keep moving. It wouldn't do to be found dead if he was going to turn up later intact, for if his power still existed he suspected that this possessed body would gradually grow to resemble his own. Whether or not that was true, he could not just dump the

body without risking being hunted for killing himself. H e ' d have to hide both the body and himself.

Then there was Madelaine. She wasn't Family yet; he had hoped she would never be in the sense he had always used the phrase. He could hardly tell her the truth. He remembered her kiss as he left the house in the quai St-Bernard. The kiss that had landed on the cheek whose colour was fading in the back of the trap.

It took ten minutes to persuade the horses to move at a level trot. He'd never learnt how to manipulate such beasts. A vague echo in the back of the mind told Emil that the assassin knew horses, but the knowledge was outside Emil's grasp.

73

He drove back along the boulevard St-Germain in the dark and the fog, trusting to the body's instincts, watching the large strong white hands in front twitch the reins and urge on the horses with the long black whip. With his own mind, he wondered where he was going. His new body knew.

The carriage travelled parallel to Île de la Citée before turning south towards the thirteenth arrondissement, and arriving at the decaying residential quarter to the south of the surviving buildings of the Benedictine monastery.

The house which the carriage finally approached was surrounded by an overgrown hedge, and instinct got Emil there without a second death.

He dragged himself up the drive, bump, bump, bump.

Surely someone was watching, but the house was overgrown with ivy and no lights leered around its blinds. Somehow he got inside, and put his corpse in the great carved bath for safekeeping.

This was going to be messy. He would have to ensure that the body, if found, could not possibly be identified. He took his pocketbook from his frock-coat, from 'its' frock-coat.

H e ' d have to think of his own body as an 'it' from now on, to make what he would have to do easier. Searching the house, he found a sharp knife and a hammer. The Brotherhood were always on the look-out for reports of fatalities so he should keep his face from the broadsheets; and while fingerprints were still a curiosity in France he

could not take any risks that they might have records of him from the time of his birth.

The every-day noises of the house oppressed him. They were too soft and furtive to mask his activities. He could not help adding to them; a certain amount of noise was unavoidable: ounce for ounce bone is harder to break than oak. He could only hope that the people in the houses on either side were deep in slumber. He managed not to be sick for quite some time, until he began to wonder what hobbies this body had to be so unaffected by blood and bone.

He had to leave 'it' in the bath, under water, in pieces, while he was in the kitchen retching. He couldn't face the 74

bath, not straight away, so he sat in the front room for a while and sorted through his new clothes. In his pockets he found a flintlock lighter, a crushed packet of cigarettes, a chewed pencil stub and two hundred francs. He bit the pencil. He had strong teeth and they fitted the marks. There were no other identifying marks in his clothes; they were cast-offs in all probability. The front room was sparse. Emil guessed that this was a flash-house; an establishment maintained by a criminal or a gang of criminals as a refuge rather than a place to live. Oddly a room had been set up as an artist's studio but it was clearly unused.

His hands were shaking. He thought it was fear for a time until he realized that this body was craving a smoke. That made him cough violently when he tried it. Too much conflict between the body's habits and his own. His body would have to forgo the pleasures of the sot-weed. He cleaned up as best he could and changed clothes again, taking an artist's smock and thick trews from a pile in one of the side rooms. They were probably infested with lice but he could not afford to be squeamish, with his own blood encrusting the assassin's coachman's uniform.

The presence of a telephone in the house was slightly surprising, but perhaps an assassin found it of use. He considered telephoning Madelaine. She was enamoured by any new fad, be it telephones or the campaign to free Captain Dreyfus. With a cold shock that brought home his imprisonment in this other flesh, he realized that he had no idea what he sounded like. A few choice swear words uttered with his new vocal cords convinced him that he wasn't sounding himself.

Perhaps he could contact a member of the Family, even his father? That would be a last resort, he decided. He could still remember the

despair with which they had greeted his desire to live outside Family circles. He could only imagine their faces when they had found him gone. Doubtless they had still hoped he would agree to marry at their dictates simply to try to produce children that were more human. That were more use to his father.

75

The prospect revolted him. What right had he to sire horrors, to force his condition upon an unsuspecting posterity? Besides, even if the Brotherhood remained the danger he had always been told, was the Family's vision any better?

He remembered a phrase from one of his father's lectures:

'Stern soldiers raised against the unholy'. He had seen similar headlines in the papers. It was politics. Merely politics.

He had wanted to live as a normal man, not as one of a line of heroes or, as his suspicions led him to believe, one of a Family who were being used. It had, apparently, been too much to ask of fate.

76

Chapter 6

When Armand had left for the night, Jarre sat alone in his office turning over the pages of notes the gendarme had made about the votes in the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate.

The man was competent. Too competent, and too strong, and too good a shot. He was probably a spy. Except that a spy would have known to seem less efficient.

The notes confirmed Jarre's own researches. Since Mayeur's death politicians had been shifting alliances, but Armand had managed to dig out details that he had overlooked. One crucial vote buried among the army appropriations was of particular interest to him, and although there had been no reason for Armand to have paid it special attention, the thoroughness of his research had laid bare the changes. Since the Dreyfus business, the Government's funding for shadow projects had been redirected from the Directory accounts to the resources of the Ministry of War. Several politicians had opposed that; not out of any love for Dreyfus but out of respect for what the Directory had accomplished, and perhaps out of loathing for Major Henri, the new chief of the Ministry of War.

Since Mayeur's death, the few remaining supporters of the Directory had turned away, one after another.

What the hell was the connection?

Even with night falling outside, Brother Tomas's work-room was warm and cosy. It held a work-bench with tools and a medical examination table, as well as propagation racks for his plants. It had comfortable furniture and mellow gaslights 77

that cast a pearly gleam across its mahogany panelling.

August Mirakle hated it even more than the one underground.

He picked up the object from the bench which Tomas had pointed out to him. It looked like a hand-gun but it was a dull gold colour and engraved with complicated scrollwork. Its handle was carved with figures of men with butterfly wings.

It was too heavy to be a toy. 'What is it?' Mirakle asked.

Tomas smiled. 'Well, my dear doctor, if something fits the hand like a

gun and has a trigger like a gun, I'd guess that it was a gun. Wouldn't you?'

'But it's all of a piece. Where do the cartridges go?'

'I can beat that question, August. Where do the bullets come out? Do you notice that the barrel is solid?'

'I make it a general rule not to look down the barrel of a gun unless absolutely necessary.'

'I think it is necessary, unless we give it to one of Montague's fingermen and let them read its history. But then he will know that we have this, and I don't want him to know.

Not just yet, anyway.'

August nodded. The gun felt slick in his hands and he realized he was sweating. It was the thought of the fingermen, of course. Gruesome wizened creatures, they could break into the past of an object like an ordinary man shelling a nut. Their hands were long slabs of hypersensitive tissue that they held, normally, curled up against their chests in white cotton mittens. The mittens had to be laundered often.

They always smelt of limes and sour milk. It was, he supposed, something in their perspiration. The bad feeling was purely subjective, of course. They probably saw nothing wrong in their appearance, and they served Montague's needs admirably. The thoughts, running into panic, left him babbling.

'Surely she's one of Montague's anyway? I told you she must have learnt of your location after eavesdropping on my therapy session. She fits my ex-receptionist's description of her attacker.'

'Possibly, though I ' m surprised Montague has not always

known where Brother Tomas lives. I've tried to be visible enough, heaven knows. The plan won't work if Montague fails to underestimate me.' Tomas moved lithely over to the nude body on the examination table. 'She's certainly not one of his concubines, unless his tastes are changing. Possibly she's a dupe with an altered body. Can you divine anything?'

August winced inwardly at the thought of attempting a divination. They just did not work the way his books said they should. At best he would be screaming at shadows for days. He had to get Tomas off the

subject.

'She must be one of his agents. I mean, who else could have sent her? The Family? A third force?' He rubbed at his collar nervously. He could feel the dirt on the back of his neck. He realized he was still holding the gun and put it down hurriedly.

Was he making Tomas angry? It was impossible to tell. Tomas's face was the same mild mask and his eyes the same bland blue that they always were. August realized it was not the thought of the fingermen that was disturbing. It was the Grandmaster. It was always the Grandmaster.

'I think I know enough about the Family to discount them,' Tomas said calmly. 'She doesn't seem like one of Montague's failures. He tended to breed from Caucasian stock. Typically short-sighted. In an ideal world, in the world I shall make, nothing will be wasted. I want you to remember that, August.'

That was a threat. Wasn't it? He was saying that h e ' d make me into something, into one of his doomed assassins. People to be flung to Montague like Christians to distract a mad lion.

August felt himself floundering. 'She could be a shape-shifter,' he said, and wished immediately that he had bitten the end of his tongue off instead.

'My agents, who of course also report to Montague, have kept a careful watch on the Family. There are no known shape-shifters in their ranks except the boy Emil, and if he could do *that* with his body, he could have become functionally invisible with less effort. They are politically naive, we can discount them almost entirely from the practical problem of taking control of France, but they are not stupid. If they

had sent a shape-shifter to spy on me, they would have picked a less detectable shape.'

Tomas was angry, but August could not stop himself. Just for a second, curiosity won out over fear. 'And a third force?'

he asked.

'Arriving in Paris n o w ? ' Surprisingly, Tomas laughed.

'August, this is simply overcautiousness on your part. Since we

arranged for the imprisonment of Dreyfus, the Ministry of War has been very co-operative. There is no further enemy for us to fear. Believe me, I would know. I honestly refuse to believe in the chain of coincidence that would be needed to draw another power-bloc into the equation now. There just isn't room for another conspiracy in Paris. You're right. She must be one of Montague's.'

'If she is, and she doesn't go back, he'll know we have this weapon anyway.'

'Oh, but she will go back, suitably mesmerized by your good self. But first I want to know what this is. Could it, for example, kill me, do you think?'

August felt naked under Tomas's apparently kindly gaze.

Was he supposed to respond to that? To somehow give away that he wanted Tomas dead? Did he want the Grandmaster dead? He realized he really did not know. He was tired, and sick of being afraid, that was all. It all came down to what was the most frightening. Once it had been dying in poverty like his father. Now it was either Montague or Tomas.

With only the briefest pause, Tomas continued: 'More importantly, could it kill Montague? You know there's little chance of the last two deep-cover assassins I sent succeeding.

Disguised as one of his altered guards and one of his concubines, they may just get close enough to attack him physically, but experience has taught how futile that is. It's like a little game we p l a y '

'Except that we only have to play until our mad opponent loses interest,' Mirakle said ingratiatingly.

'Indeed, or until his own following, composed of the less gifted candidates you find for him, becomes a sufficient drain upon his fading strength.'

Feeling that he had perhaps overstepped the bounds of propriety by his daring to speak of the Grandmaster, and himself as ' w e ' , August up-ended the hand-gun in a vice on the work-bench and stared at the end of the barrel. At first sight it was flat and solid but on closer inspection the metal of the barrel end was slightly concave, with a barely discernible translucence. 'Have you tried firing it?'

'A very faint light about the barrel, and a noticeable smell of ozone. Not having any disciplinary offences to judge at present among the Brotherhood, I've had no pretext for selecting a human target, but it has no obvious effect on flowerpots or elderly rhododendrons. There's a possibility it may stun greenfly, if that helps.'

August hesitated. His status with the Brotherhood was shaky at best. His magick - hypnotism and the old ways; the rituals handed down from the Stone Age - could not duplicate the casual displays of power of which Montague and his followers were capable. Once, if August's books were accurate, it had been different; but now the best his magick could manage was a brief touching of minds. It was ironic that power had become available to the Brotherhood, power sufficient to make everyone touched by it a new creature under Heaven, but that, despite his desires, despite his bluster and his greed, the order's 'tame magician' was afraid of it.

Sometimes he thought Tomas understood that fear. The Grandmaster had after all refused to let Montague's power fully enter his body. Unfortunately it hardly mattered whether the Grandmaster understood or not. Montague's influence was on the rise in the Brotherhood. August's continued presence, his continued normality, was becoming an embarrassment for the Grandmaster's faction. If he failed in any task, it could bring the matter to a head. 'I'll investigate it thoroughly,' he stammered.

"Thank you, August, that's all I ask. Tell me, have you seen the new rose-delphinium hybrids?' August felt a moment of relief, followed by a fresh wave of panic. Oh God, just get me through tomorrow, he thought. Let me find out something he can use, please.

81

Paris: 28 N o v e m b e r 1897: 9.30 a.m.

Inspector Jarre leant out of the window of the jolting carriage. 'Are you enjoying yourself?' he shouted, snarling.

Armand, seated by the driver, his face lashed by the driving wind and fine rain, missed Jarre's sarcasm completely. He nodded like a maniac and, Jarre thought, urged the driver to go faster. 'It's a murder, not a fire,' Jarre yelled as the passage of the carriage over the white cobblestones in front of the church of St-Severin threatened to bring his liver up into his throat. 'The corpse isn't going to burn to ashes before we get there.' He sank back into the black seats of the police

barouche. The gendarme sitting opposite him, a dark thin man called Gerard, smirked, and the need for good discipline overcame Jarre's irritation. He had to establish his authority, but he also had to be trusted not to favour one officer over another, nor could he afford irrational dislikes.

'He's a good officer,' he snapped. 'I wanted the best and I trust you both to be the best. There is a great tradition for us to uphold. When the Sûreté Générale was founded in 1812 it consisted only of Vidocq and his four assistants, but after five years it was making over seven hundred arrests a year. I have two assistants and I am, I must admit, no Vidocq, but I expect the same unswerving devotion to justice from you as that which broke the hold of the Apaches on Paris.'

The speech caught in his throat. Whatever the truth was about Mayeur's death, he was not going to be allowed the freedom to investigate it. This morning he had discovered that Perraudin had arranged for the case to be stamped closed. He and Armand had been given strict orders to stand down from any political cases. Jarre didn't have the authority to arrest a drunk for pissing against a wall, if it was the wall of the Palais Bourbon.

Now they were on their way to what sounded like a typically squalid little murder.

In the alley-way behind the dilapidated hotels it was cold and wet, and the cats were fighting. The pot-boys and serving-82

girls of the hotels, being naturally of a sporting temperament, craned their heads around the wooden shutters of their kitchen and scullery below-stairs windows to cheer on their respective champions.

The orange cat (renowned in the mythology of the boot-blacking-faced boys for its tangling up of lines of washing, the cooks' apron strings and even, when ratting, the moor-ings of boats at the nearby wharf) had already gained itself a mighty reputation. The black cat, which was a newcomer to the district, had not yet won itself such fame. But its spitting, its jumping, the sprightly elevation of its tail made it the choice of the staff of the lower hotels.

Clawed by its rival, the orange cat darted down a narrow alley. The black cat followed it, but in a moment both were fleeing the noise growing up behind their hissing.

As they raced out of the dark, eyes wide, the Doctor was waiting for them, crouched down like a backstop: his linen jacket turned

translucent as skin in the rain. He calmed them, stroking their ears and trailing the string from an old yo-yo he had found in his pocket in front of them. They hunted it.

He watched their movements. Mostly the string escaped.

Their reflexes were well below par.

'You feel it, don't you?' he whispered. 'Animals and madmen, and absinthe drinkers first.'

Leaving the cats, he pressed an ear to the blue wooden facade of the TARDIS in the dark of the alley. Under the grey EuroGas tarpaulin the TARDIS still whistled to itself on a rising harmonic. Nearby some of the empty washing lines vibrated in sympathy. The Doctor attempted a brief counter-point but found the melody sliding off into 'I've got you under my skin'.

Finally he just patted the Police box softly, like someone quieting a nervous horse. 'After this we'll go somewhere peaceful. Cremorne Gardens, Chelsea, 1863, with acrobats, or somewhere else, somewhere nobody dies.' He kept his fingers crossed behind his back as he stepped inside the TARDIS.

* * *

83

Chris got down from the barouche thoughtfully. His keen ears had picked up Jarre's lecture. He knew of Eugene Francois Vidocq, of course, from his research, but the reference to Apaches puzzled him. As soon as the Inspector was out of earshot, Chris nudged his fellow gendarme. 'What was the Inspector saying, mon ami?' He had not been able to speak to Gerard when the Inspector had briefly introduced them, but he was sure that they would work well together.

Gerard shrugged. 'Only that we should imitate the great Vidocq in wiping out the street gangs.' He spat into the gutter. 'He forgets that Vidocq ended his life in disgrace and the street gangs were back before Vidocq's successor was warming his arse in the office of the Prefecture.'

Chris nodded. So the Apaches were street gangs, and still in existence. Good, he was getting a firm grip on the period.

He was about to ask Gerard if they still wore war-paint when the

gendarme entered the foyer of the house. Chris straightened his uniform and followed.

In a moment he forgot his question. This was the real past. It was old. This house had been lived in continuously and it had mellowed with the process. The foyer was panelled in dark wood, and smelt as if the brown-black colour had been smoked into the beams. The chintz wallpaper, patterned with assorted sea-shells and marine icons, had the consistency of flypaper from the deposits of tar left by the exhalation of tobacco fumes.

The iron-grey eyes of the concierge, an old woman of more than sixty years, stared grumpily at the wallpaper.

Inspector Jarre stood by the desk and cleared his throat.

The concierge continued to stare at the wall as if fascinated by the spiral contours of the shells.

'Bonjour, Madame,' said Jarre. 'I am Inspector Jarre of the Sûreté Générale and these are my assistants, Jean-Paul and Gerard. I understand you reported a death.'

'Next door, Monsieur. My husband will show you.'

An old man, his face framed with wisps of white hair, came forward from an inner room. Chris wondered how old he was. He was probably not even a hundred.

* * *

84

The Doctor's room was barely the size of a broom closet. He glanced in it once, nodding as if its condition was perfectly adequate. Chris's and Roz's rooms were bigger but just as slovenly; the mildewed and tobacco-stained wallpaper hung down like cobwebs, almost touching the counterpanes. The TARDIS infrastructure closest to the Cathedral manifestation was still showing strong signs of Ace's message. Squinting, the Doctor could make out the roundels of the default architecture under the block-transfer overlay but otherwise he might as well have been in the real Paris. Good. He was relying on that.

He sat down in Roz's room, which was marginally the largest, and spread a 1957 map of Paris on the bed. The map was printed in sepia with a blue surround, and slid out of a cardboard sleeve with the

motto 'A Bird's-Eye View of The Heart of Paris with its best hotels and restaurants and shows, conceived and pin-pointed by Grand Marnier' written on it. He still had the bottle of Grand Marnier somewhere, unopened. The Doctor held the map up to the light, first the right way up and then sideways. Whatever the creature had been that had killed Viers's associate, it had come out of the sewers. With a thick black pencil he began to draw the line of the sewers onto the map.

When he had finished, he put the map on the bedside table by the black and gold telephone, and lay back. He had decided to wait for Roz or Chris to contact him. It was humiliating to be forced continuously back to the TARDIS

like this, but it was necessary. There were powers on the move in Paris, the echoes of whose speech was enough to drive a telepath mad, and he could not afford to lose any of the edge that his normally precarious psionic abilities provided. For once in his lives, he needed to sleep.

Besides, it was the quickest way he knew to make the phone ring, aside from getting into the bath.

Inspector Jarre waited until the smirking gendarme had finished gasping white-faced over the bidet before sending him downstairs. His own throat felt tight and he had no desire to turn 85

around and look again at the body in the enamel and iron bathtub. The bathtub's carved legs were turned out like a sphinx's.

Ebony inset in iron. Yes, the bath was very much à la mode; and the body was, the body was still there, that's what it was. Still where they had found it, in bits, big bits, under the water, under the reddish brown water.

The big house was unoccupied. If it had not been for the nosy concierge of the apartment house next door, who had heard a disturbance and sent her recalcitrant husband to force the door and investigate, the murder might have gone unremarked until the stink had spread beyond the cold bathroom. The smell there was bad, but a body in a bath, like a second Maret, in a flash-house in a district full of painters and night-ladies and forgers of holy icons, was lilies in the field compared to the stench from the Ministry of War. At least Jarre told himself it was. He wanted his breakfast to stay down.

The body was that of a young man, but that was all Jarre could tell. The face had been smashed into fragments of bone, only held together

now by tatters of skin. The hands had been removed. Grimacing, he checked something, thrust-ing his hand into the icy water. Not circumcised. At least this was not another religious killing.

'Armand,' he shouted. 'Give me a hand up here.'

Together they fished the body from the bath and wrapped the parts in sackcloth for the medical experts to examine.

Jarre noted that Jean-Paul did not turn a hair, unlike the vomiting Gerard. Insensitivity? It hardly fitted in with his general manner, but the alternative was that he was used to death, and Jarre doubted that the Alps saw that much bloodshed. Was that another point against him?

'I've been talking to the concierge, Inspector,' Jean-Paul said. 'She rents her upper rooms to art students. They're likely to be unco-operative, I ' m afraid, if her opinion of them is accurate.'

Jarre nodded. 'She's right enough. Students are always trouble. Rotting their brains with absinthe and smashing the windows of the embassies in the rue Gabriel is the least of it.

It wouldn't surprise me if they were involved.'

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'Instinct, Inspector?'

'Experience. The last time I trusted my instincts, a sweet old lady from Le Hague poisoned the second of her nephews before I suspected.' Jarre smiled inwardly. It had been an early case of his, and of a young foreign police sergeant who had been in Paris for the summer. He remembered the young Belgian's eyes, shrewd above an incipient attempt at a mous-tache. Jean-Paul's eyes had the same shrewdness.

Perhaps he deserved some leeway, some responsibility, or perhaps if he was given enough rope the contradictions in his character would come out in the tangle. 'Gerard and I will take this back to Doctor Tardieu's medical staff at the Prefecture. Get the statements from the artists and meet us there.'

In a cavern lit by flares from the ruptured gas pipes, Montague looked down upon his children. That was what they were, these members of the Brotherhood who had come to him for the energies to make their fantasies real, for although they had not sprung from his seed they

had been changed by his flesh and power. He began to speak.

'Yesterday I began to take the first step on a journey that will bring us to our rightful place as the chosen people. You are the harbingers of a new humanity. Yesterday the first of the cursed Family fell before our hand, before our least little finger. The Family are effete, decadent, they cannot stand before us. We shall seize back the Doll's House, the central icon of our power, the vessel of the Dark Gods. The blood of the damned Family will water the meadows of France. All who helped them will be destroyed. All.

'When I have it back beneath my hand, I will make you all as immortal as I am, and we will move to other cities; recruiting and revelling and learning new ways to live and feel and kill.' Joy shone in his ancient eyes. 'It will be glorious.'

When Jarre had gone, Chris ran to the telephone he had seen in the other room and dialled the code for the Notre Dame area of Paris, followed by a random number.

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'Hello?' A w o m a n ' s voice that he did not recognize answered the phone. Chris nerved himself to lie.

'Madame, I am an engineer of the phone company, checking your line for misdirected calls. Could you lay the phone receiver down for a couple of minutes without ending the call? Yes, just lay it down by the side of the phone. And thank you, yes. No, there isn't a charge.' Chris's face was crimson with embarrassment. This had better work.

The familiar voice of the Doctor broke in on the line.

'Chris?'

'Yes.'

'You sound surprised.'

'Of course. I ' m surprised. You talked at me for twenty minutes before I left, explaining this, and I still don't know how the TARDIS is doing it.'

'Nonsense. It's a perfectly simple mapping of the electrical signal in the phone line, as picked up by the TARDIS

sensors, to a like-dimensioned area of the TARDIS's interior.

Mind you, I wouldn't want to try this if there were more phones in use. The old girl's looking a bit green around the fluid links as it is.' The Doctor's voice was grumpy, and it had a note that Chris could not immediately identify. Sleepi-ness? Surely not. The line crackled, and Chris was not sure if he was still connected.

'Hello,' Chris said. 'Hello.' No response. He grimaced.

'Listen Doctor, if you can hear me, I can't hear you. I can be reached at the Hôtel Mervaillac. I've joined up with the police inspector I mentioned in my note, and we're on general homicide duties. No leads at all on Mayeur, but w e ' v e got another body. Young, male, odd blotchy skin, very thoroughly dismembered. The inspector's taken it back to the Prefecture for examination. Is Roz doing any better than I am?' This was too painful. 'I'll try another number in that area, on the hour. I've got to go and talk to some students.'

In the TARDIS the Doctor dropped the sizzling phone, and licked his burnt fingers.

* * *

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Later, notebook at the ready - he had no desire to embarrass Jarre with any further displays of memory - Chris found himself listening to an earnest, slightly balding man in grey who emphasized his words with florid hand-waving.

'It's dreams that I paint,' he said triumphantly. 'Not the real world. Photography can do that; that is why it will be the death of art.'

Like the other students he had clearly been drinking heavily the night before and Chris had found him lying face-down across a partly painted picture. A .violent yellow-green ochre smeared up onto his cheek-bone. The painting showed a dark stone building, too forbidding to be a home, its windows, large bow affairs, crammed with half-seen detail. Chris realized it was a toy shop. Suddenly the white lead and ochre splodge that had half transferred itself to the man's face came into focus on the painting. In the front of the picture a doll, or a hairless baby-thing, crawled towards the spectator.

The other students nudged each other behind the artist's back at his harlequinesque appearance and Chris wondered if it was kinder to

ignore it or draw his attention to it. He opted to ignore it.

Another of the artists looked over from the divan on which he reclined languidly, a bag of ice pressed firmly against his scalp.

'But Byram,' he expostulated, 'the shop exists. I have seen it. It stands off the Street of the Four Winds, where the Latin Quarter meets the stews. An ill-favoured establishment in an ill-favoured place, but a real one.'

Byram snorted. 'Alexi, you are an imbecile. Of shops and men alike there are a limited number. The marks on canvas that paint can make are not infinite. Next you will say that dolls crawl from this shop, yes?'

Alexi shut his eyes. 'I really cannot debate with you when my head is splitting. That is a real shop belonging to a real Monsieur Montfalcon, and it would not surprise me if anything did crawl from it, so morbid is its frontage. You drink too much absinthe, Byram. It makes you grumpy, and it makes your hair fall out.'

'Oh, why not tell the truth, Alexi?' said the third of the artists, a gaunt lantern-jawed man who had not yet spoken.

'Something is preying on the artists of Paris, a sickness, a madness. Byram there has the first signs, morbid and unpleasant dreams. He'll be off to join the Brotherhood of the Immanent Flesh soon enough.'

Byram spat in disgust, but his eyes looked nervous. Alexi turned on the third painter. 'Shut up, Tellec. What use is it to frighten Byram like that? He may be an oaf, but he's our oaf, not one of those hooded monsters.'

Tellec scowled. 'I say he will join them, and he will. Once the dreams start it is only a matter of time.'

'Immanent flesh?' said Chris.

'They teach that the essence of flesh . . . of protoplasm . ..

is upheld by a p o w e r . . . a force or potential permanently pervading the universe, and that to embrace it is to live life as art itself,' Byram said hesitantly.

Alexi grabbed his arm. 'Who told you what they teach?

They are never seen, only rumoured. Where did you hear that?'

Byram looked at Alexi with horror, and his voice cracked.

'I dreamt it,' he mumbled.

Chapter 7

T i m e U n k n o w n : S p a c e p o r t Five: Undercity: T h e F u t u r e

The meat-people were spilling out of the neon-lit abattoirs.

From her vantage point on the narrow ledge half-way up the shattered skyscraper Roz could see down into the boiling anarchy of the underland. Her mimetic suit blended in with the ancient ceramic tiling of the building.

A mile above her the steel underplate of the overcity filled the sky like the biggest thunderstorm imaginable.

It sounded like it too. She wore ear-plugs specifically tuned to be dead in the harmonic frequencies of the overcity's antigravs, and they still made her teeth chatter. She might need to visit an autodentist and have a new set of molars implanted after this mission. Just the benefit a young Adjudicator needed to look forward to after a tricky assignment: a long slow root-canal.

Roz was feeling rightly pleased with herself. Her trainer, Konstantine, would see she could handle a solo job. The drone eyes she had sprinkled round the stonework were holo-filming the scene for evidence. The sonics, set to affect the limbic system and the autonomic nervous system, had flushed out the merchandise. Soon the farmers would be trying to get the beasts back in their pens and then she could arrest the lot.

The flesh exporters had been growing mindless human DNA-based clones and shipping them off-world for the 91

tables of gourmand carnivores. A human with an apple in its mouth was getting to be a status symbol on the dining platters of some of Earth's old enemies. It would have been quite a credit-spinner if Earth had had more enemies left; as it was, it was probably bringing in a third of the Undercity's illegal income, right after the virtual sex and the real drugs.

Even the aliens that did not eat were buying. The Arcturan Ambassador had hung half a preserved human carcass on his wall at an important social event and called it a tribute to human twentieth-century art. Diplomats were still trying to decide if it had been an honest compliment that had misfired or a sly and deliberate insult.

Aliens: pre-emptively pacify them or ally with them; they still refused to make sense.

Down below now, the farmers were stirred up. Their nervous systems were arranged differently to the clones so the sonics weren't affecting them, but the stampede was forcing them out to try to recapture the stock. Most of the farmers seemed to be ITs. That fitted the profiles Roz's sources had put together. The reptiles were probably runaways from one of the deep-mining stations. Roz couldn't understand it. ITs had solid second-class citizenship. Hell, there'd been an infoflash on Channel Ninety that said the 'Indigenous Terrans' - Channel Ninety was intensely politically correct and considered the abbreviation 'ITs' to be in poor taste - had nearly cornered the jobs in the sub-surface shale industry that provided over ninety per cent of Earth's hydrocarbons. They had stable work, separate schools and hospitals, petition rights to the Imperial Landsknechte. Why did some of them throw it away like this?

They had to be stupid. How bright could a species be that locked itself away in hibernation chambers to avoid a catastrophe and then mistimed their alarm-call by a million-plus years? She remembered an old joke. How many Silurians does it take to change a lightbulb? Answer: one, but don't expect it to come round first thing in the morning.

Not that she was prejudiced against people. She could still remember wincing when her grandmother had gone on about the 'grey-faced half-breeds' of the Imperial Court. 'They did 92

not have our advantages,' her mother had said mildly. "They can't help their faces.'

'Well they don't have to go on holo-vision with them,'

her grandmother had snapped, secure in her pure African aristocracy.

August Mirakle moaned and snatched his hand from the assassin's forehead. Tomas had returned after leaving Mirakle alone for a time, only to insist that he immediately regressed the Negress a dozen years, looking for when she was recruited or constructed by Montague. The hand-gun lay forgotten on the bench, a set of broken jeweller's tools beside it.

'Well?' Tomas snapped.

'It's like a vision of Hell,' August whimpered. 'Imagine a city of blast

furnaces, of Blake's "satanic mills". Ruin it.

Then build over. Fill the sky with metal and the air with noise. She crouches on high like Lucifer surveying the fallen, and in the red fires below demons with three glowing eyes herd the damned into the mouth of the pit.'

Tomas wound a silk handkerchief around his right hand calmly and hit August hard in the face. 'This is reality,' he said. 'It has, you will agree, a distinctive feel.'

August coughed blood from his split lip. 'What?'

'You are being played for a fool, August. Montague has spewed these memories into her skull to make it impossible for us to learn anything from her, and to weaken and confuse us. It suits him to be seen as an unstoppable supernatural power, but he isn't. When I first met him he was healing beggars for food in a hovel, his precious Doll's House stolen from him, a trophy in the black warehouse of the Shadow Directory. I made the political connections that let him retrieve it. I kowtowed to the imbeciles of the Directory for years, maintaining an interest in their ridiculous esoterica so that they did not associate me with its loss. Not Montague, I.

It was his blunder that let the Family steal it. His, not mine.'

August shuddered. When he was out of Tomas's presence, the Grandmaster had always seemed preferable to Montague.

N o w he was hard pressed to remember why.

Tomas unfolded his handkerchief and dabbed at August's lip tenderly. ' I ' m sorry August, you know the pressure I've been under. Attempts on my life, conspiracies, black spot in the garden. I should not have struck you. You know I value your endeavours.' His voice rose to a shout. 'Now get back in her head, and make it work for me. Take Montague's illusions and twist them. Strengthen her aggression and give her a focus on Montague. I don't care what she thinks he looks like, provided she's prepared to kill him.'

Roz waited until the Three-eyes were milling around like green ants on a red table-cloth. Then she gave the signal that released the Hexachromite-B gas. The Three-eyes started to stagger as the gas ruptured the mucous membranes of their lungs. One raised a clenched

three-fingered hand in the Reptile Power salute before the arteries lining its respiratory tract collapsed and it choked on its own blood. Most of them just died. Quick and clean: just like Konstantine liked it.

She watched the Adjudication reclamation 'bots swoop down. The 'bots' audio speakers were playing Justifiable Ragnarok's 'Odin's Missing E y e ' at twenty decibels, just like in VonDoon's classic vid 'Heaven N o w ' . Back-up was in a humorous mood; barely one in a million people would pick up that historical reference. The 'bots had neural whip attachments fastened to their multi-use limbs. The meat-people would be rounded up and used in the Church of the Adjudication's organ-banks to increase the lifespan of law-abiding citizens. If they could find any.

Two hundred plus cases of human-genome copyright fraud, multiple counts of dodging export fees, dozens of crimes against the Dignity of Humanity Charter, doubtless several cases of illegal breaking of contractual indenture to the shale mines, all closed. It had been a good morning's work.

Except it had not been Hexachromite-B, had it? Surely it had been a knock-out gas she had used, not a one-part-per-billion LD99.9 nerve gas? Surely she had not recognized the noise the back-up team had run through the 'bots' speakers; it could not have been called music until years later when 94

Bernice had made her sit through VonDoon's vid, insisting that it and Come The Trickster's H v L P had been the only honest accounts of the war on Heaven. A thick grey wall of confusion swept over her. Something was wrong. Something was very wrong.

Major Henri opened the envelope that his agents had taken from the headquarters of the Gendarmerie. The paper of the message, impregnated as it was with a smart chemical that expected to meet the natural oils of Chris's fingertips, flashed into a magnesium flare and burnt to a fine grey ash. Henri swore under his breath.

August sipped the glass of water Tomas had brought him.

'I've had to deepen her trance. I got the impression she was fighting the mesmerism, trying to cling to more recent events. She seems to be rejecting my suggestion that the memory we found earlier should have been handled more forcibly, but I get the impression that it was a logistical, legalistic objection rather than a moral one.'

'So she would have no objection to killing if she thought the death was

justified?'

August bit back a sharp reply. Obviously not, if she's an assassin, he had almost said. He temporized. 'No sir. I don't understand many of the images that Montague has put into her mind, but I am fairly certain I can suggest a sequence that will prime her to kill him. She'll provide the necessary imagery herself, from the store-rooms, as it were.' He hesitated. 'May I ask why it's so urgent? If I could have had longer to work on the weapon

Tomas shrugged. 'It may not be up to us. Montague is moving. He has set one of the novices to attack the Family.

Heaven knows why he thought the boy would succeed.'

'He failed, of course!'

'Apparently not, actually. That's why I think we may not have much time. Montague and the Family are like two useful complementary machines. One, Montague, is useful for a time, but grows progressively overheated. The other, the 95

Family, is fiddly and a nuisance to keep in repair, and performs no useful work of its own, but functions like a safety valve to draw off the head of steam from the first machine until its fires die down and it is safe again.'

'Except this time Montague is destroying the safety valve?'

'Yes.'

'And then?'

'Why, boom of course, my dear August. Boom!'

Chapter 8

The morgue of the Caserne de la Cité, the main building of Paris's Prefecture of Police, smelt of sawdust and blood.

Antiseptics were not wasted on the dead. It made Jarre think of grave-robbers. Indeed, the abnormally tall Dr Tardieu and his squat assistant seemed like something from a Gothic tale as they methodically examined the body.

Dr Tardieu eased himself up from his work and passed his knives to the other doctor. Tardieu was semi-retired now, no longer the proud imperious figure who had presided over the most celebrated cases of the past thirty years. His posture was curved and bent from too many close examinations. His eyes however were bright and clear and, Jarre thought, the intellect behind them was equally undimmed. He still deserved his reputation as the finest forensic surgeon in France. Inspector Jarre thought that the other doctor watched his movements like someone watching God.

'Well, I think we can be reasonably certain that these injuries were inflicted after death with the purpose of disguis-ing the body,' Tardieu said.

Jarre sucked at his teeth. 'I thought as much. That explains the disturbance that the neighbours heard.'

'Indeed. Now, as to the cause and time of death, I feel that these marks on the tibia and fibula are most suggestive. If the splinters of the compound fractures are exposed thus . . . ' Dr Tardieu thrust his hands into the shattered meat of the body's right leg and, hooking his fingers under the bones, pulled them into sight; white mosaics among the red. 'We can see a 97

pattern of breakages consistent with the impact of a large semicircular blunt object.'

'A horseshoe!' Jarre said bitterly. "The man was run down in the street.'

'That would be my conjecture, yes. There is only one thing inconsistent with the hypothesis that death was caused by the blows of a horse's hoofs: the peculiar damage to the frontal lobes.'

Jarre looked hard at Tardieu. 'Surely the deliberate attempt to

obliterate the face would have caused considerable injury to the brain?'

'Yes, and that surface contusion of the lobes is present, and would doubtless have caused death in itself if the body had not already ceased to function. However, in addition to that the surface of the brain is riddled with fine holes only visible when the tissue is examined through one of the most modern microscopes. I can suggest nothing that might account for it, except that some part of the brain has actually been removed.'

Jarre considered. The Shadow Directory had records of many strange occurrences, from the Woodwicke Calamity of the previous century onwards, but he could not recall anything recorded in the Black Files that would account for the injuries discovered by Dr Tardieu. He began to feel really interested. This was the kind of case the Directory existed to investigate. Bon Dieu, it felt good.

'Could the damage have been caused by something forced into the skull after death, piercing down into the brain?'

Some alien vampire, he thought gleefully.

'In such a case, I would expect the brain to show evidence of compression of the tissues, and ruptures spreading outwards from the site at which each object entered the lobes.

My examination shows no such damage, only an absence of material as if some matter had been physically removed from the brain. I am at a loss to account for it.'

The other doctor cleared his throat. 'Well, gentlemen, I hate to interrupt but if nothing going into the brain could have made those injuries, then it seems to me that there's only one possibility left.'

'And what pray is that?' Jarre said, irritated.

'They were left by something making its own way out.'

Later. Much later. Another mission. A vital one for the Adjudicator Secular. A big juke-baron was spending freely, too freely, thumbing his credits into the accounts of citiblock administrators, local nobility, anyone with two blind eyes.

Something was going down on the streets. Informants were as nervous as domestic pets in a Tetrap restaurant. Roz did some button-pushing. It did not take her long to find the right buttons.

The juke-baron was going to thumbprint an agreement right across the Level Seventy-Five crime families, from the IT Triads to the Apaches. Apaches? That was a new one, Roz mused. Probably a corruption of apparatchiks. Retrogade style victims hyped up on Juke and Znikov Cola.

Centcomp confirmed the danger. Today Level Seventy-Five, tomorrow Seventy-Four. The Adjudicator Secular put on the black silk cap. Roz struggled to remember the importance of the ritual. It just looked stupid. She kept her face resolutely immobile as the orders were handed down. It was to be a pre-emptive. The juke-baron was to be burnt down in mid-meeting. Centcomp predicted the mutual hostility among the crime lords would lead to several resultant vendet-tas and a consequent increase in arrestable offences. She drew a smart-gun from Stores. Once out of the building she thumbclicked it to ' d i m ' . There was nothing worse than a gabby hand-gun.

It mumbled in her shoulder-holster. She caught the words

'lasers in the j u n g l e ' , and left it to its cyber-soap-opera dreams. Smart weapons, bah. Give her smart adjudicators any day.

Later still. An influx of heavy-duty enforcers and bodyguards swished through the Seventy-Fifth Level corridors like meat-animals with gunbelts. Genefreaks and multi-steroid secreters, all highly illegal. Roz was already holed up in a con-apt on Level Seventy-Six.

She had the meeting suite wired for sound and vision. Odd 99

how that phrase had persisted in the language when no one had used 'wire' in centuries. The computers sorting out the data could locate someone precisely in the room on heartbeat differences alone if necessary. From here she could burn down diagonally and fry the juke-baron's brain.

She watched the bodyguards come and go, and planned her escape. Some were needlemen, cyberized assassins who were brought to Earth by the Morok Nostra and abandoned when the Morok Empire was overthrown as a result of Earth-funded insurgents. Some were Ogrons. They were too stupid to matter. Except, and this was something that sprang at once to Roz's trained attention, the needlemen weren't carrying their characteristic monofilament weapons but long loaves of

bread, and the Ogrons were wearing little flat black hats. Berets, she thought they were called.

Some sort of illusion screen, or hallucinogenic gas? No matter. She knew where her duty lay. Wait until the signal lined up and then fire. No need to think at all.

A cough from the doorway drew Jarre's attention from the operating table. A dark, saturnine man wearing a drab yellow greatcoat stood there. 'Doctor Tardieu, Monsieur Inspector, Monsieur Doctor. I am sorry to have to ask you to put your theories to one side, but this body is now the property of French Military Intelligence.

'Inspector Jarre, I am sure the Sûreté Générale has other tasks on which your skills could be honed. Doctor Tardieu I will expect a written report detailing your findings by noon tomorrow. You may omit all non-germane material about your microscopic examination of the brain. Undoubtedly the poor victim was simply suffering from a peculiar physical lesion. As you yourself said, the microscope used to observe these features is new, consequently we cannot know how many brains may exhibit them. Your associate can, I trust, hold his tongue.'

Dr Tardieu sniffed disdainfully. 'I stand corrected in my business, sir. May I enquire just who in French Military Intelligence I have the honour to be instructed b y ? '

The dark man smiled. 'But of course, how remiss of me.

My name is Major Hubert Joseph Henri, I am in charge of state security at the Ministry of War. For the purposes of all matters relating to this investigation you may regard me as speaking for the President of France.'

Doctor Tardieu bowed, blood-stained hands clasped tightly across his white-aproned lap. 'You will excuse me, gentlemen. I suddenly find myself with no stomach for this examination.

Perhaps Major Henri would care to get his hands dirty.' The surgeon walked out of the examination room, back held dead straight. Jarre knew how much the gesture must have hurt him.

The assisting doctor scuttled out after him, abashed.

Henri picked up one of the chairs that lined the room, left over from the training of Tardieu's students and, turning it round, sat astride it. 'So Jarre, how are you finding the police?'

Jarre smiled. 'I just moved a stone and there they were.

Fat, glistening and useless. Paid up, and paid off.'

'That's a very harsh judgement for someone who has barely set foot in the Prefecture building since his appointment started. You've just not given them time, Anton.'

'Ah Major, I do not think we are on first-name terms. Call me a stickler for formality if you wish, but we have not been introduced by a third party, nor I think are we likely to be friends.'

Henri laughed harshly in his throat. 'I am supremely uninterested in your friendship, inspector. But I want you to bear in mind that your subversive activities are not unob-served. There can be only one loyalty in France, and it is not your obsolete loyalty to the principles of a revolution dead and rotting a hundred years ago. Do I make myself clear?'

'Perfectly. May I ask why the death of an unknown man apparently trampled by a horse is now of interest to Military Intelligence? Are there no leaked documents to pursue, no Jews to ruin? Or is it simply that if I investigated someone stealing candy from a baby, you would still feel this jealous need to grab the case for yourself?'

Henri smiled. 'If you will persist in the delusion that all 101

our efforts to stamp out corruption have as their target you and your friends, then it must be hard to see that the preservation of law and order might be one of our interests.

It's no concern of yours, but I have reason to believe that this man left a notorious house on the quai St-Bernard just before bis death. If I mention the name Margaretha Macleod, I am sure you will make the connection. He may have been meeting one of the girls there, or eavesdropping on the foolish men in high places who flock to such dens of ill-repute. Personally I suspect he was killed in mistake for a courier or agent of a foreign power. You will concede that such a possibility makes it our business?'

Jarre gritted his teeth. 'Yes sir. May I go now sir?'

Henry clapped his hands ironically. 'Yes, get about your duties. There must be some crimes in Paris that have no political or military implications. Try to stick to investigating those, and remember if I keep finding you underfoot, I'll have no compunction about bringing my boot down on your face.'

Jarre went out into the cold corridor, his hands clenched white in his pockets. Supercilious bastard, who did Henri think he was; seizing the body, trying to pass off that rubbish as a theory? Jarre had heard of the infamous Margaretha Geertruida Zella who had abandoned her marriage to a Dutch army officer called Macleod to become a courtesan and oriental dancer in Paris. There were rumours she was in contact with the Germans, but Jarre doubted that anyone with so flamboyant a *nom de théâtre* as Mata Hari would survive long in the field of espionage. He was more worried about how Henri had learnt so quickly about the body. It had only been reported by the concierge early that morning and only he, Armand and Gerard had known of the report. Could Gerard have betrayed him? Or Armand? Armand had a better opportunity, he could have used the telephone in the house where the body had been found to contact the Ministry of War.

Gerard had only left Jarre's side when he had proved too squeamish to remain in the mortuary while Tardieu had **102**

begun the dissection. Surely there had not been time for him or any of Dr Tardieu's staff to alert the Major? Jarre cursed inwardly. It looked as if there was no alternative. Armand was a spy for the Ministry of War. He was part of the conspiracy determined to break the Shadow Directory in France. A conspiracy that was prepared to lie, to cheat, to ruin careers and to kill.

In the gallery of the sewer Roz looked down but saw only a computer-interpreted location map of the juke-baron's hide-out. She tightened her finger on the trigger of her rifle. Under Mirakle's command, one part of her mind helpfully supplied another with the feel of a smart-gun's contact control.

Her finger twitched.

The rifle cracked and twisted in her hands. Conditioned to expecting a recoilless blast, the impact in her shoulder knocked her sideways. The bullet flew wild. Something screamed like an alien or a clone in the night. The pain in her shoulder coupled with the harsh smell of cordite. Adjudication weapons killed or paralysed. They lacked this immediate brutality. In the moment of shock, the blue-white fluores-

cence of the con-apt walls split into droplets of light that spat away into the humid air.

What the hell was happening? She clamped down hard, and began basic reorientation checks. She was not in a contractual apartment. She was in a gallery of steel and tile above a dark underground river. A good sniper position. One level up from the targets and no maintenance ladders between them and her. Excellent. Provided the targets could not scale sheer wet tiles and brick.

Seeing the targets and smelling the stink of them on the eddies of wind, Roz did not feel sure of that. Below her, on the tiled banks of the sewer, the hosts of Hell were spread, stirred up like maggots in a kicked corpse. She tried to get a good look at the creatures, to dispel the irrational fear that had welled up when the walls of the illusionary thirtieth century had broken down. A tiny doubting voice mocked at the back of her mind. What if this was not real either? The 103

things below made her hope it was not. In the shadows, a man made of mouths opened and closed his flesh mindlessly.

Another, the one she had shot, a grey mass apparently composed of tendrils tipped with knives, chuckled thickly with no mouth at all. Its scream had been one of surprise or amusement. Others more humanoid were more horrible still.

Under the dark overarching brickwork of the great sewer, the man she had aimed at stood on a low mound and harangued the damned, his voice an insectoid buzzing. A part of her mind she didn't control told her his name was Montague, and he was her enemy. Beneath his sandalled feet, the lithe flesh of the mound writhed as his most intimate acolytes made themselves more comfortable.

One of the figures behind the mound turned a great luminous eye in her direction. She had seen virtuals like this in the Church of the Adjudication Black Museum; CyberDores, and Hieronymus Bosch 3000s, a Millennium in NeoSodom; all the slickly wrapped perversions of technology. She had arrested a few of the makers in her time. Tax evasion, mostly. She was not about to try to arrest these. Not without an armoured-up force of Adjudication Bug-Hunt Specialists or the Doctor behind her.

This looked like the kind of thing even the Doctor might issue guns for.

She knew without looking that the handbag and the alien gun had

been taken from her. Only the clumsy rifle remained.

She inspected it as she ran, by the light falling through the iron gratings in the ceiling.

Projectile weapons weren't really her forte, but she'd got some practice in on the TARDIS archery range, and in a big room below the West Arboretum which the Doctor called the Dunkirk Suite, where the floor was dried hard with the mud of old army boots and tank tracks. T h e rifle was bulky. Some sort of high-powered hunting rifle, she thought. Did the French hunt elephants in their colonies? Roz hoped so.

The walkway was narrowing up ahead. Part of the sewer looked as if it was under repair or construction. Under the early afternoon sun, iron rungs caught the light. Bands pointing to the upper air. If only she could reach them before 104

the things from the sewer below could scale the walls.

A humming thing rose up from below the level of the walkway. Roz caught a lightning glimpse of a naked humanoid with wings developed from incredibly enlarged finger joints. Its chest bulged out like the prow of a ship. It had hardly any flesh and Roz guessed that its bones must have been hollow, perhaps even naturally pocketed with hydrogen or helium. Its wings were tipped with bone spurs. Roz's hand shook slightly as she raised the rifle. If its tissues were suffused with hydrogen it might explode if she shot it. If she did not shoot it, it might slow her down. Already she could hear scrabbling at the smooth walls below the gallery and she suspected that if she looked down she would see the nimblest of the creatures crawling towards her over a pile of its bleeding and injured fellows.

The rifle barked in her hands, and a bullet tore through the creature's membranous wing. It made a noise like a mad hummingbird as it spiralled back into the dark. She saw a spark of flame in the membrane of its torn wing burning up towards the bone as it fell. Roz ran on, feet skidding on the slick tiles of the gallery, and threw herself towards the iron rungs.

The explosion tore up the walkway behind her, and blew her down into the abyss.

'Honestly, Doctor, I don't know how you kept your temper with that jumped-up Major,' Tardieu said, cleaning his hands in the big metal sink. 'If I was an Immortal, I'd soon have sorted him out.'

The Doctor shrugged. 'The Académie Francaise does not have the influence it once had with the Senate and the Council of Deputies, let alone the President.' He dunked his hands briskly in the water. 'The Four Hundredth and First Chair is a purely honorary appointment, anyway. You might say that I ' m only an Immortal barring accident.'

Tardieu cackled with amusement. 'Or politics eh, Doctor?'

He held out his hand. 'Still, it was a singular honour for me to work with a member of the Académie, even one travelling incognito.'

The Doctor grasped the proffered hand firmly. 'To be candid, I was pleased to find someone who remembered my name. Most of my little monographs have long been forgotten. Although there was a book on fly-fishing I penned under a pseudonym that turned out to be quite a money-spinner.'

In his work room, Brother Tomas stiffened and reached for a pair of secateurs. Holding them by the blade, he passed them to Mirakle.

'It's failed. As we expected, Montague still lives. It's time for a retreat.' He leant forward and brushed his long hair forward from the nape of his neck. He glanced sideways.

Doctor Mirakle was holding the gardening shears as if they were poisoned. Tomas sighed. 'A fragment of tissue is enough, August, but take an ear if you must. I ' v e made greater sacrifices, and I cannot afford to wait.'

'Not even for half an ear, eh?' Mirakle said. Tomas saw that the conjuror's fat hands were shaking. He scowled.

'I can feel my loyalists changing sides, Anton. Montague will be upon us shortly. Do you think fingermen and courtesans are all that he has bred in the crypts under Montrouge?

I have no desire to be better acquainted with his torture drones and his internal examiners. We will let a decoy die in my place. It will not be the last time, I dare say.'

Mirakle put the edge of the scissors to the tip of Tomas's ear, and snipped.

Blood spurted onto his lace sleeve, and a fragment of flesh fell to the

table.

Tomas took a black wood box from hi s pocket and put it down on the table next to the piece of his ear. 'You will find this instructive, Mirakle. The homunculi develop q u i c k l y '

The ear began to expand, put out feelers, grew into a skull.

Chapter 9

Roz shook her head to clear it. She was in a dark crevice off the main artery of the sewer. Her fall had been broken by the water. She was drenched. The rifle was nowhere to be seen.

Even if it had been near at hand she might not have noticed it.

The light from above had dimmed. The afternoon must be clouding over.

She wrung out the sodden material of her lower dress.

Nowhere to dry it in a sewer. Goddess, it was too easy to start thinking of non-survival issues.

She tore the crumpled and befouled part of the dress off and wadded it into a ball. Throw it away, or keep it in case it was possible to lay a false scent? Did they hunt by scent? The flyer had looked as if it might have used sonar. Some of the others probably had her brainwaves dangling before them like a big luminous arrow pointing at her head.

She forced herself to concentrate. The situation was by no means hopeless. They had not found her while she was stunned. With luck they thought she was dead in the explosion. If they could be avoided for - how long had they been after her now? - an hour, maybe two? If they could be avoided that long, they could be escaped. Was it two hours?

She was starting to regret never having had a timepiece chipped into her retina, even though she had always smiled wryly at the goggle-eyed intensity of clock-watchers. It would not work right anyway. Not even a chipclock could cope with time-zones and time-travel.

Something snuffled out in the tunnel, low down, to her 107

right. Something on all fours. She debated sticking her head out into the light. A vision of a snake-necked thing striking just as her head popped around the corner dissuaded her.

The noise got louder. She thought of the shapes Montague had been preaching to, and gritted her teeth. Anything that snuffled, breathed. Anything that breathed could be throttled.

Roz's first law of unarmed combat.

She fished part of her ruined dress from the water and tore enough material to wind into a garrotte.

The sound moved closer.

She waited until it drew level with the entrance of the sub-artery.

Then she snarled and leapt.

It was small, less massive than a child.

Its fur was wet, and smelt familiar.

A wet tongue licked at her face.

She realized she had almost throttled a dog.

In the Deep Ward, Francesque Duquesne opened his grey eyes and found himself staring into those of the stranger from the day before yesterday. He hoped it had been no longer.

There was nothing in the pink room he could use to tell one day of the week from another. Nor could he remember how long ago he was brought here. There were no church bells in earshot to distinguish the sabbath from a workday. Assuming he had ever been conscious on a Sunday.

The doctors' notes at the end of his bed were out of reach, and he suspected were carefully devoid of information. It is possible with training to determine what is being written merely by watching from a distance the movements of the top of a pen. None of the doctors had written anything like a date or the name of a day.

He heaved himself up in bed. 'So you're back. I don't suppose you bought me any more grapes?'

The visitor pulled a whitish bag from his pocket. ' I ' m sorry if they're a bit m u s h y '

'I did not expect to see you again. What's the matter? Was my debriefing insufficiently detailed for the gallant gentlemen 108

who have taken over the remains of the Directoire Tenebreux?'

The visitor shuffled his feet. ' I ' m not with them. But I do want to know more about them.'

'Lucifer? Lucifer?' The voice was old and deep and rich. The dog tried to bark, and Roz clapped its mouth shut with her hand. It was hard to imagine any of the things she had seen before having any interest in pets, beyond how far they could crawl with their intestines ripped out, but just because someone had a dog did not mean he was a potential ally.

On the other hand she was wet through, in the dark, alone and pissed off, and somewhere nearby things with more arms than table manners probably had her on their dish-of-the-day list. How much trouble could one man and his dog be by comparison? She stood up. 'Over here?'

A man tottered into one of the patches of diffuse light. He was dressed in rough work clothes. Old work clothes. His face was elderly and kindly, but with a look that might have been weakness or wasted strength about the eyes. He was carrying Roz's rifle. He seemed to find nothing surprising in there being a woman with a torn dress hiding in the sewer.

'Hello? My name is Pierre Duval. Have you seen my dog?'

With a start, Roz realized he was blind.

'Why should I trust you?' The man in the bed was trying hard to sound wary. Too hard, perhaps?

'Why did you trust me before? You've already told me too much for your safety.'

'I was alone and disorientated. I needed to talk.'

'You really expect me to believe that? That it's good to talk?'

'I beg your pardon?'

'Sorry, private joke. Ask me again in a hundred years.'

Francesque wagged a finger at his visitor. 'Now I ' m sure.

That's why I trusted you. You're *Le Docteur*. We've been waiting for you since Mademoiselle Dorothée's disappearance.'

* * *

'Delicious,' Pierre heard the woman say, but the sound of the teacup coming down on the bone-china saucer was heavy and Pierre knew it had not been tasted. No matter.

His back to his guest, a china plate in each hand and one balanced on the crook of his left arm, Pierre turned. He imagined he must look like a living cake stand. No doubt on seeing the sticky pastries piled high on the plates his visitor's face would take on a greenish hue. It was a small vanity that he permitted himself, this feeling of superiority. His only vanity. He had adapted too well to his 'retirement' to feel any other. It was hard to be proud when time had left you crippled. Abilities lost, opportunities blocked. The priest had tried to help him, but not even religion had brought any consolation; not the priest's variety anyway.

Below and to the side of the picnic table, he could hear the thick black effluent of the open sewer flowing away into the dark.

He seated himself on one of the cane chairs and bit into an eclair. 'So how did you come to be hiding down a sewer? Not that it's any of my business, I know.'

'Do not blame her, Doctor. She made a good - is "stab at it"

an appropriate colloquialism? - a good attempt at being.'

Francesque hesitated. 'Well, not inconspicuous. That is not, perhaps, her way, but at least she was not overtly out of place, nor anachronistic. The Shadow Directory has a lot of experience of people trying to act "not overtly out of place".

By 1892 she was on our Red List. When she disappeared, we took the unpardonable liberty of searching her house. I led the team. It was, you may imagine, something of a revelation.

Among her effects was a certain diary.'

The Doctor frowned. 'Reading someone's diary, good grief. You'll be steaming open love-letters next.'

Francesque shrugged. 'As it happened, we could barely read any of it. The agent who picked it up said that he saw pages in English when he first flipped through the diary, but neither he nor anyone else has ever found those pages again.

The visible text has baffled the best cryptographers available 110

to the Directory, as well as thwarting the archeological skill of Lionel Barton, although he did note a resemblance to the carvings found on certain ruins in Ecuador. I myself, suspecting that the majority of the diary was not in code but in a language whose alphabet is based on the principles of geometry, consulted widely with mathematicians. Alas, the celebrated author of *The Dynamics of An Asteroid,* whose treatise on the binomial theorem had once so impressed the Académie Francaise, proved to have disappeared, and other experts professed themselves outclassed.'

The Doctor glanced up from his perusal of the notes at the end of the bed.

'Don't mind me. Do go on, this is fascinating stuff. So what did you do next?'

'I put the diary aside, marked the case as being not yet closed, and accepted my next assignment. A body had washed up on the banks of the Seine. It was hideously deformed, a freak. Even the police who drag the river for the corpses of men killed in brawls wouldn't go near it. It smelt of fruit, and clutched giant hands across its pigeon-breasted chest. It wasn't dead.'

'So what did you do with it? Lock it away in a warehouse, next to the Holy Grail?'

'What do you take us for, Doctor? We tried to nurse it back to health, of course. Here in the Deep Ward. Sadly it did not long survive. It lacked something, a mineral perhaps, or an element not found on Earth. Nor was it especially communicative, although it could speak French after a fashion, but it did have one very special trait.'

'It would tell you all about anything that you put into its hands.'

Francesque halted, the flow of his anecdote broken. 'Why, yes.'

'So you gave it the diary to hold?'

'It seemed the obvious solution.'

'The effort was probably what killed it.' There was anger in the Doctor's voice. Francesque had to look away, the stranger's eyes were too piercing to meet. The voice continued: 'Your 111

so-called alien was a psychometrist. A pretty basic psi-power, the ability to follow the world-line of an object back into the past. The

smell of limes is a common side-effect. That or violets. It burnt itself out trying to read my past, just so your Directory could get its hands o n . . . ' A note of puzzlement entered the Doctor's voice. 'On what? Technology? Secrets?

Mr Kipling's recipe for fondant fancies?'

'You do us an injustice, Doctor.'

'I can live with that.'

Francesque shrugged. 'Then why should I help you? You must need help, or why come back here?'

'I was looking for an honest man, held against his will.'

'And I was looking for a time-traveller. So tell me honestly: how is the future?'

The Doctor met his gaze unflinchingly. 'It's brutal and violent. France is invaded twice by Germany, and a little farther on Paris is flattened by an Ice Warrior reprisal weapon. Shortly after that Europe is decimated by plagues unleashed by a race from the farthest reaches of this galaxy prior to global invasion.

French culture is lost forever, and the ideals of the Revolution are buried under an aristocratic empire that lasts until the thirtieth century. When that falls the whole of Europe undergoes another dark age.'

Francesque blanched. 'Mon Dieu. This future, then, you have come to prevent it?'

The Doctor smiled. 'No, to make certain of it.'

Chapter 10

Tomas walked through his garden to the tiny chapel in the grove of orange trees. Blossom and fruit hung incestuously on the same boughs, fragrant as High Church incense. The late afternoon light made everything as pale and brown as an acid-etching.

He knelt in the chapel and tried to pray. It was quiet there, and the robust carvings of the stalls offered him an obscurely tactile comfort. He wondered if he was trying to fill his broken memory with mere density. Oh God, give me substance, he thought, and the prayer seemed more real than he was.

What had he done during the time of his broken memory?

It was impossible to be sure. All he had were fragments.

Striking a fat man in the face with his hand wrapped in silk.

Meddling in politics. Other things too fantastic or distorted to be real. A waking nightmare of biology.

Francesque Duquesne had his hands over his ears. ' I ' m not listening to you. There's nothing you can do that will make me help you.'

'Really? I thought you wanted my knowledge.'

'Not any more.'

'It's only a penny for my thoughts.'

'What profiteth a man if he gains the entire world but loses his soul?'

'So you do think there are things worth more than life.'

'For a person, yes.'

'Not for a country?'

'What do you mean?'

The Doctor's voice was grim, and dry as dust. 'I mean that France as you think of it, the France you value, will die the quicker if you d o n ' t help m e . ' He seized the end of the militarily folded bedsheet and

tugged. The tight sheet of linen stretched between his hands. His left hand twitched. A wave rippled through the sheet. '1884. A psychic force tugs at space and time.' He jerked with his other hand. 'Still to come, unless I or my friends can prevent it, at least one more tug. Possibly more. Already space-time is stretched to fracture point. More than one disruption might end everything.'

Francesque scowled. 'End everything h o w ? '

'Already the tension is an unnatural condition. A weakness. A time-fissure. A breeding ground of dreams. Rogues and vagabonds seize the powers of gods. Soon time itself disrupts.' The Doctor balled the sheet up in his hands and let it fall in a creased mass. 'Oh, and it would also heat up space to approximately ten to the power thirty-two Kelvins, reunify the strong and electroweak forces, and utterly vaporize Paris.

Need I go o n ? '

Francesque's voice was tortured. 'How can I believe you?'

'You believed me when I said the future would be bad.

Why doubt me when I say it might yet be worse? You've seen it, haven't you?'

'Yes, damn you. I've seen it. The French army falling. The Passchendaele Ridge. The land ironclads. The rotting bodies on the barbed wire. They promised me it would never be.'

' W h o ? '

'La *Fraternité.'*

'Tell me.'

Francesque was sobbing now, his hands clutching at the remaining bedclothes. 'After the death of the alien, the psychometrist, I was taken off active duty. Anton thought I had been under too much pressure. I was given a desk j o b . Sorting out the Directory archives u n d e r Mont-St-Michel, one of the locations the Directory acquired during 114

Napoleon's tussles with the Vatican. I found something missing. A haunted doll's house, captured during the forced relocation of the Directory to London at the time of the Bourbon restoration. Then it had been used to generate ectoplasmic manikins that killed. Nasty

business.' He wiped his brow. His hand came away wet and trembling.

' A n d ? ' the Doctor prompted.

'It had been stolen from us, God alone knows how long ago, and something else was in its place. A trap, I suppose; or perhaps a residue, or an echo, if you like. I caught the full impact of it. Went, well, mad. It's all a bit vague, now. I wasn't surprised to wake up here, but after I'd been here a while I worked out that things must have changed politically.

No one I knew was in charge. No one would talk to me.

Then, after your first visit, *he* came to see me. He knew about my dreams of the future, called me a precognitive, said I must have been infected by the power in the psychometrist.'

' W h o ? '

'Major Henri. H e ' d read the Dorothee file. It had been in Dreyfus's papers. He wanted your secrets. He said if the Brotherhood could gain them it would be able to prevent the wars. I ' m sorry.'

'What for?'

'Why, betraying you of course.' The new voice was sardonic. Turning, the Doctor saw a tall figure in a faded yellow coat move out of the shadows at the end of the room. 'He works for the Grandmaster now.' It was Joseph Henri, the man from the Ministry of War. He pointed a revolver at the Doctor. 'And so do you, Doctor.'

'I can't believe it,' Pierre said, setting down his tea which had gone cold while the woman had outlined the events that had led her into the sewers. 'I know Brother Tomas and I know the sewers.' He whistled between his teeth. 'Tomas was good to me when I lost my sight; and I've worked underground all my life. The sewers have been bread and dripping to me, and wine and vinegar besides. There's nothing down here to harm a person.'

'What breed is your dog?'

The change in subject took Pierre by surprise. 'I don't rightly know, Madame. He was given to me by Tomas after I lost my sight, to be my eyes and company for me, so I've never seen him.'

'He has very intelligent eyes. He reminds me of the hunting dogs on my family's estate.'

' W h a t . . . what colour is he?'

'Sandy brown. Like a neo-labrador.'

'Yes, that would suit him. I've often wondered what colour he was. I called him Lucifer when I thought he might be as black as the old gentleman, if you'll pardon my frankness, Madame. 1 suppose I'll have to change his name now.

I ' m sorry, I ' m rambling. So few people come to see me nowadays. I ' m forgetting your predicament. Where would you like us to guide you to? We know all the sewers, do Lucifer and me.'

'Could you guide me back to Tomas's garden? He has something of mine that I want back.'

Tomas was trying to remember the beatitudes when he heard the noise. It was a nasty thick self-deprecating sound, like a jackal clearing its throat. Tomas wondered if he had ever heard a jackal. He tried to rise.

'No, don't get up. I'd like to remember you just the way you are. On your knees like this, without even a flowerbed for justification.'

Tomas stood up. The name 'Montague' floated through his mind. An empty name without any mental images attached to it. Despite the lack of a prompt from his defective memory, he felt *a frisson* of fear.

Turning, he saw that the buzzing voice came from a tall figure swaddled in grey robes, wound tight as bandages. It broke off into another cough, a real one this time, painful and wracking. The two figures with it sidled forward to support it; one on either side. The first of the figures was human. The second was not.

* * *

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Roz let Pierre lead her through the tunnels. He seemed kind enough, if eccentric, but there was a watchfulness in his blind eyes that she did not like. Perhaps it was just that he was blind but his eyes were perfectly formed. Loss of sight where the organ was intact was unknown in her century, at least among the citizens able to pay for an

hour in an autodoc.

The sooner she was out of his sight, so to speak, the better she would like it.

Tomas moaned in pain as the demon closed its birdlike claw around his hand and squeezed. The bones in his fingers broke under the skin.

Despite the agony he was determined not to give Montague the satisfaction of complying with even the simplest of his wishes. There was no point. He could see death in the old man's eyes. Montague was going to kill him anyway. Without his volition a sentence formed itself on his tongue.

Mocking. Courteous. Against reason his lips formed the words: 'I didn't expect you to come yourself.'

A buzz of laughter spasmed from Montague's throat. 'I could hardly let an old friend shuffle off this mortal coil without pausing to show my respects. Could I, Jean?'

He motioned for the demon to release Tomas.

Tomas cradled his shattered hand, holding it close to his body like an injured baby. The impulse that had made him speak had abated, but Montague's words demanded some response. He settled for honesty.

'Why do you call me that?'

'You deny it?'

'I have no memory of ever having gone by that name.'

Montague sniffed. "This is very tiresome. You are quite the likeliest candidate, you know.' He glanced at a pocket watch, large as a silver turnip in his wizened fist. 'The likeliest alive by now, anyway.'

'Why would I lie? You're going to kill me a n y w a y '

Montague craned his head to one side and picked nervously at the skin of his lower lip. 'Oh, my dear, how incisive. You even sound like Mayeur. Well, I will not 117

prevaricate. A decent conversation is quite impossible if both parties are lying. I am going to kill you. Irrevocably, beyond even my power to repair. You've faked your own death too often, and this time I am not prepared to kill you only to find your authority still runs among

my Brotherhood. Once that is established, though, there is no reason why your death should be unpleasant. Philmore, the vial if you please.'

Montague's human supporter, a cadaverous man dressed in a shabby ulster, reached into the inner recesses of his coat.

His hand came out a mass of white insects, crawling and biting. He screamed, a thin bitter cry of anguish. Tomas saw that he had only two teeth, one upper, one lower, like broad serrated horseshoes, and the inside of his mouth was mottled like a toad's skin.

The creatures burrowed into his palm, sending a spray of scarlet into the air. He collapsed into a foetal curl of pain, writhing under his coat. Montague chortled. 'Philmore always was absent-minded.' He kicked the ulster viciously, and it burst with a rotten tearing sound. The coat was empty of flesh. Bones covered with a sickly yellow residue stained the black earth. 'And ambitious. I can smell ambition, you know. It smells of orange blossom and black roses.' Montague bent down and fished something from the coat. It was a glass vial closed with a rubber stopper. "This contains a rare essential oil. A botanical scholar of your eminence will recognize it when I mention the medieval legend of the Upas tree, or the Black Lotus of Stygia. It is tasteless, painless and quite fatal.' He gave the ulster a final little kick, almost a dance-step, of disdain. 'Its one disadvantage is it does attract insects but, taken internally, I guarantee that it will not bother you in that respect.'

The demon gave a rasping gasp of horror. One of the insects that had devoured Philmore clung to the back of Montague's hand. Tomas realized Montague had picked it up with the vial. A m o m e n t of wild hope burst through him. Then Montague raised his hand to his lips and dismissively crunched the insect between his teeth.

'Simply, tell me that you are truly Jean Mayeur, and I will 118

let you drink the vial. Otherwise things will not go so easily with you.'

Tomas nodded. 'Throw me the vial, then.'

Coming out of the sewers in the street by Brother Tomas's house, Roz had taken her leave from Pierre. He had stood and watched her climb back into the garden before departing with his dog, and his direct gaze had raised the hairs on the back of Roz's neck. In the garden she had hesitated between investigating the chapel or the house. The screams from the chapel decided her.

'I almost wish I were this Mayeur. It sounds as if he has led you a merry chase.' Tomas opened the vial and poured it on the ground. It steamed theatrically for a second. 'I barely know you, Montague, but already this seems typical. If you must murder me I think a bullet in the back of the head would serve well enough. I will not drink poison for your amusement. If you wish to murder me that will be your crime; I will not threaten my immortal soul with the sin of suicide to please you.'

'Cease your prattling!' Montague flung off the supporting arms of his follower and hobbled forward. 'Your doddering Freemasonry was a joke when I met you, a group of local landowners playing at defunct black magic and rigging deals in the Council of Deputies to keep their noses in the trough. I brought you power and you let it be stolen from me. I brought you energies that would have let you rebuild the Empire and you used them to grow novelty roses.'

Tomas bowed. 'A certain amount of what you say may be justified, but I am afraid I remember it only vaguely, as if it happened to another. I have made the only peace I can with God, and if I have kept any power from your hands then I may hope to have done his work.'

Montague's demon follower stepped forward, sliding nails like hypodermic syringes out from the swollen tips of its fingers. 'Let me cut out his tongue, master.' The words, formed by a hard tongueless mouth, spat out like curses.

With a shock, Tomas realized he recognized him as if through a haze. It was the man he remembered tormenting in his garden. He had hoped that memory was a lie or a fantasy.

Montague chortled at the meaning in Tomas's glance.

'Oh no,' Montague laughed. *'You* would never dirty your hands with transmogrifications, would you? Not unless it was *necessary.'* He made the word sound a curse. 'My followers remake themselves; they do not have to be tortured into other shapes. They are not my victims. They embrace my powers.' He rested his hand for a moment on David's head, and stroked his fur paternally. 'Oh, your little infiltrators made their children's attacks on my life. David even got close enough to touch me. But he understands the truth now. I have freed them from their orders, and they have chosen me.' He smiled. 'Perhaps you're right. Our methods do differ. I, at least, have never been a hypocrite.'

His voice wheezed with good humour. 'As a Brother of the Church, Tomas, you will be familiar with the need for Christians to emulate Christ.' He gestured at the massive tenantless crucifix above the altar. 'We are going to help you.'

In a dark carriage galloping through the city, the man who had been called Brother Tomas screamed. Mirakle ripped the silk sleeve of his dress coat and bound it round the stigmata in Tomas's wrists. It had begun. They were killing the *doppelganger*.

'How is it?' he whispered.

'How do you think?' Tomas yelled. 'Make the coachman drive faster, I must get out of range. I am not protected. The decoy is still linked to me psychically. I feel its pain now.

When it dies I will liv e its death.' He bit into his cheek with agony, and his face turned old and drained. 'Damn him, why didn't he drink the poison? It would have been so quick. Too quick to have been induced across the link. It cost my agent his life to suggest that mercy to Montague.'

Mirakle hammered on the roof of the carriage with his cane.

'Lash the horses. Run them to death if you must. A man's life is at stake.'

Tomas squirmed, and gasped. An oval of ruptured flesh burst redly through the side of his travelling cloak.

'The spear of Longinus,' Mirakle muttered. Tomas screamed, and his voice broke down into a mad babble: 'I would have drunk it, but he is me, is me, is me.'

Mirakle cradled Tomas in his arms. This was worse than it had been with Mayeur.

The Doctor raised his hands into the air. 'One question?'

Henri nodded indulgently.

'This room. It's a kind of null envelope, isn't it? A psychic dead-zone?'

'Yes, the product of some of the alien knowledge gathered over the years by the Shadow Directory. They used it purely for its healing

properties. We will find it far more useful, I suspect.'

'Like you do now?'

'What?'

'It's protecting you now, isn't it? I can feel it.' The Doctor crinkled his brows in concentration. He could feel a power beating on the outside of the Pink Room. 'Something thinks you ought to be dead.'

'Shut up.'

The Doctor beamed slyly. That had got close to home.

Major Henri must be as aware of the force as he was. A wave of pain and death dissipating in the pyschosphere of the city, groping for weak-spots. Looking perhaps for more than that, for minds of a particular stamp, for particular individuals, or a particular individual. "This room is a good block, but it's not perfect is it? I imagine you're in some pain now. It would be a shame if the block failed.'

'Bastard.' Henri drew his pistol. 'You are not so useful to me that I could not decide to kill you now if you become too annoying.'

The Doctor glanced at Francesque. 'If you trust me, take my hand.' He stretched out his arm across the bedclothes.

Roz watched the figures in the chapel through the stained 121

glass from her perch in the orange tree as she stripped down the rifle, reassembling the clumsy mechanism quickly. This time she must not miss.

She checked the sight. Cross-hairs and a squint, what a way to aim a weapon. Twenty years' instinct expected it to self-correct in her hands. Her target's skull was full in the sights. Whatever he had done to her, she could not let anyone die like that. She pulled the trigger. The stained glass window of the chapel shattered.

Francesque Duquesne grabbed the Doctor's hand. His power, freely given, leapt through the Doctor's brain. Precognition; thoughts out of sync with time. A way around the barrier of the Pink Room. A spark of ozone and fire grounded itself through the Doctor and Francesque. Across the room, Henri fell like a dead man, his head a bloody mass, his wrists torn and bleeding, his side a spear wound. A psychosomatic Christ.

Staggering to his feet, the Doctor put his ear to Francesque's chest. The Directory agent's heartbeat was faint and shallow, but steady. He would live but he was in no condition to travel. 'Doctor.' Francesque's voice was a whisper. 'I saw it. I saw ahead. Closer this time. The toy-shop in the Street of the Four Winds, that's where it is. The Doll's House, the centre of the storm.'

Crucified and dying, Tomas did not feel the mercy of pure velocity as it blotted out his pain.

Montague roared with anger.

'David, kill me that impudent musketeer.'

Roz dropped out of the lower branches of the tree and began to run as David burst from the door of the chapel. His back-to-front legs looked clumsy, but he ran like a bird on fast-forward. The rifle was j a m m e d so she threw it over her shoulder, hoping to break his stride.

No luck. Her chest hurt with exertion, the muscles in her legs were spasming. The ground mugged her when she was not looking.

* * *

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Inspector Jarre banged on the door of the tatty lodging house.

Surely Armand could afford to stay at a better class of residence than this. He lit a match and consulted the address he had written on a scrap of paper; yes it was correct, just as the Surete records indicated.

An old man wearing a flannelette nightshirt and a long cap with a tassle stuck his head out of a casement window and swore at Anton. The argument was still raging at fever-pitch when Armand, spick and span in his uniform as if he had never been asleep, came out of the cheap hotel and stood at Jarre's side.

Jarre hurled a last insult at the dotard in the nightcap before turning to Armand. 'I want the truth. W h o are you, and what do you want with me?'

Emil crouched in the dripping doorway and thought about going home. A thin drizzle of rain cascaded off the gutters above him and ran down the refuse-infested alley-way. The current residence of the Family was a short walk from here, down the narrow street, but he

did not have the courage to go further. The Family was difficult enough at the best of times, without the requirement of explaining that you were returning in a different body than the one you stormed out in.

While logic told him he had nowhere else to go, the stored pain of a thousand angry confrontations made those last few steps almost physically beyond his power. His new body's house had been no sanctuary. The nosy old man had woken him with his frantic knocking. When the gendarmes arrived, Emil had been barely a street away, running. It had taken him all his strength not to kill the old man. Assassin's instincts?

He hoped so. The alternative was that they were his own.

He could no more return to the house in the rue Morgue than he could, in this powerless state, grow wings. The past was too strong there. Even stronger perhaps than it would be in the Family's current house.

He doubted he would be welcome on the quai St-Bernard.

Madelaine had loved the aristocratic pallor he had brought to their nightly assignations. Now he was normal, he suspected 123

he would lack the gothic charm that had enchanted her. This clumsy, brutish body was good for fighting and striking down an enemy, but as a lover he felt it would disgust her.

She had less experience of such things than the Family.

Uncle Johann would understand, but there was precious little chance of finding him, away from the rest of the family, with this body's pitiful senses. In his own body he could have concentrated his perceptions, making the night a flash of searing blood-red or, by expending greater will-power, have overlaid the true colours of daylight onto the black and white world of the dark. Now he could barely make out the frontage of his father's shop at the corner of the Street of the Four Winds. There was no sign yet that he was regaining his powers or his old form. Despite his disgust at this lumpy, almost unfinished body, he had not yet succumbed to the desire to wish himself back as he had been.

He was still deciding how to approach his father, for he knew that when the misery of his predicament outweighed his anger he would crawl home like a wounded animal, when he felt a hand on his

shoulder.

'I think you ought to know, Mr Veber,' a voice said, 'that you are being watched.'

Emil started. He had heard no one approach. This handicap was killing him. It was like living with his head in a flour sack. The speaker was a man dressed in a crumpled white linen suit. He held a battered metal flask in his other hand.

'Would you like some tea?'

Emil considered. Common sense demanded that if anyone was watching the toy-shop it was the Brotherhood. This man claimed to be watching the watchers but he could as easily be one of that unholy fraternity. It was too hard a problem to solve in the freezing night, under a dripping awning. He took the offered flask. The tea might be drugged, but at least it would be liquid, and might retain some of its heat. He must get warm again. He honestly did not care beyond that.

The man unscrewed the top of the flask and inverted it to form a cup which he passed to Emil. Then he unscrewed another top which the removal of the first had revealed, and 124

poured a hot aromatic stream of tea into Emil's cup. Emil held the steaming drink close between his hands and let the hot fumes warm his face.

"Thank you, whoever you are,' he said with as much polite-ness as he could muster. He still felt damp, put upon and generally at odds with the world; and common sense, only briefly abandoned, demanded that he retain some semblance of suspicion. 'Who are you?'

' I ' m the Doctor, and these are . . . ' The man looked round at the empty street as if he had mislaid something. 'Well, I ' m sure my friends Roz and Chris will be along shortly. I wonder if you could help me. I ' m looking for a psychic field-generator powerful enough that its after-image can drive hardened secret agents into a Womb without a View. It would probably look something like a doll's house.'

Emil felt his headache returning. How did this man know about the Doll's House? He clutched at a thread of sanity.

'You said I was being watched. W h o by?'

The Doctor reached into his pocket and pulled out a small hard red

ball. 'Cricket,' he said absently, 'not boules, I'm afraid. Could you hit the cornice of the bakery opposite the toy-shop with this? It probably won't bounce very well. It's been in a vacuum.'

Emil put down the top of the flask and took the ball as someone might take an object in a dream. He threw the ball hard, with all the power of his assassin's muscles. On the surface of the brickwork something squirmed out of the way.

A distortion of the stone hunched itself up into a visible shape and then flattened out again.

'What was that?' Emil asked, aghast. The shape had been like nothing he had ever seen before. Like no shape he had ever assumed.

'Something bred to watch. A human foetus re-engineered with an outer layer of mimetic silicon, at a guess. I think we should get out of its sight, don't you?'

The creature that was watching the toy-shop melted its body back into the contours of the ancient brickwork of the bakery 125

opposite. The scarlet flicker of movement that had triggered the defensive response was gone. So were the two humans. It did not care.

Wholly passive in an ecstatic state of reception, it relished the harsh pressure of the stone on its nerves. Waterproof in its layer of silicon, and immune to boredom so long as the pleasure centres of its brain reacted in their warped fashion to the exercise of its powers, it would watch forever if need be.

It did not care what it saw, or whether anyone would ever reach out to learn what it had seen. It only watched. It had no name or purpose other than watching.

'I don't think you ought to do that,' Emil said as the Doctor poked irritably at the bulky iron lock of the toy-shop.

The Doctor glanced over his shoulder. 'I don't think we're going to have the option.' Three men in long robes, each carrying a long butcher's knife, detached themselves from the shadows.

'No, I mean I have a key.'

'Why didn't you say so?' the Doctor snapped, flipping his hairpin back up his sleeve like a stage magician whose trick had started offering

him a choice of cards.

Emil was startled by the passion in the strange man's voice.

'You didn't ask me.'

'Why do you have the key?'

Emil looked behind. The men - if they were men - were getting nearer. This was not a time for a rehearsal of his life story. He slapped the key into the Doctor's hand. 'I used to live here.'

Thrusting open the door, Emil bundled the Doctor into the warm clove-smelling interior of the toy-shop. In the small amount of moonlight that penetrated its shuttered windows, the high shelves of dolls lay grey and undisturbed like tomb images. The smell of sandalwood and camphor rose from the polished wood of the long counter, and the rows of dark wooden doll's houses. In daylight, Emil knew this place would be brightly coloured, and he had on the whole good 126

memories of the Family's time here, except for his disagreements with his father.

The Doctor had positioned himself at the bow window, and was peering around the red velvet curtains and the wooden shutters. 'They're rather clumsy with those knives.

Real knife fighters don't cluster together like that. If they start swinging those things, they'll chop bits out of each other.'

'They are probably just hirelings.'

'Or they usually rely on other weapons.' The Doctor's voice was grave.

Emil edged over to the window. 'Why do you say that?'

His question petered out as over the Doctor's shoulder he saw the first of the robed men combust. The surface of the man's clothes boiled with a blue-white fire that ran in wreaths around his body. Emil clutched at the Doctor's arm.

'Flamers! They're going to burn us out.'

The Doctor's face was a mask of pure curiosity. 'Now just how do they do that, I wonder?'

'Does it matter?' Emil shouted. 'We have to stop them!'

'How are we supposed to do that if we don't understand what they are doing? Try and think, young man.'

Emil winced at the rebuke, but somehow the very unworldli-ness of being asked to speculate in the face of death cleared his mind. 'When I was away from the Family,' he said slowly, his fear fighting with the appeal of the Doctor's transparent and childlike desire to know, 'I studied the natural sciences in an effort to understand our natures. I would say that they are taking a naturally reactive substance from within the body, like magnesium or calcium, and exposing it to the air at their skin.' He waited for the Doctor to ask about the Family. Oddly his fear had quite gone.

The Doctor shook his head. 'An ingenious hypothesis but hardly sustainable. They can't be fuelling that reaction with their own bio-mass. I'd say it was a psychokinetic channel-ling, probably utilizing energy from an extra-dimensional source. Can you smell ozone?' Emil gaped, trying to make sense of the Doctor's words. 'Psychokinesis' was a Latin 127

compound word meaning, he supposed, imparting movement by means of the mind. Such a term could well be applied to the power, although how coining a word to refer to it helped in understanding it he was not sure. The rest was meaningless. How could energy be extra-dimensional? Surely Aris-totle and the astronomer Ptolemy had settled forever that only three spatial dimensions were possible; and what did ozone have to do with anything?

The Doctor nudged him. 'This shop may be something of a curiosity, but as a house it's not sufficiently bleak to suggest it requires spontaneous combustion.'

' S o ? ' Emil felt he was missing part of the conversation.

'So we ought to stop them, don't you think?'

Emil looked at the four burning pillars that were approaching the shop. 'Well, if we don't we'll be lucky if they only burn us to a crisp.'

The Doctor raised his eyebrows frantically, sending his hat rocketing up and down on his head. 'And if we're unlucky, Mr Veber?'

'Then they might wake my father.'

'You must introduce me to your family. When we're not about to be lightly grilled. First things first. Show me the Doll's House.'

Enemies approaching, hooded, horrible. Things with the heads of locusts and the numb eyes of sheep. Things that burnt like he did. Shame mingled with power in the night.

The power flowed through his veins like blood. Heat and light suffused the marrow of his bones and burst in a great shout of anger from his whitely luminous skin.

Monsieur Dominic Montfalcon awoke. The sheets of his bed were smouldering, and a layer of grey ash smoked off his plump aged body. He had burnt off the outer layer of his skin in his sleep. He hoped that was all he had burned. He breathed deeply, waiting for the familiar smell of charbroiled flesh and molten bone-marrow to congeal at the back of his throat. Nothing. Thank the Bon Dieu. It had just been a dream.

He listened to the sounds of the old shop, hoping to be lulled back to the pleasanter dreams that he had been enjoying before the nightmare had come upon him. It was impossible to sleep. Something was very wrong. There were noises downstairs.

A minute later he was out of bed. He knew that there were worse ways to die than being burnt up in his sleep. There were things in the world that would swallow a fat toy-maker up and spit out teeth and gallstones. It could be the Brotherhood downstairs, and the Doll's House lay unprotected. He had neglected to set the traps since the disappearance of Emil. It had not seemed worth it somehow. The Family was failing to breed true, and the Doll's House seemed no help.

He remembered the eyeless things in the cribs. Oh Emil, in you all our hopes died.

He crossed the room as quietly as his arthritic legs allowed and, puffing slightly from exertion, took the Russian cavalry sword from the brackets over the mantelpiece. Even without a light he knew how to reach it quickly. Guns were useless against the things the Brotherhood had bred. He had seen a slug from a French army rifle stopped cold by the leather skin of one of their warrior drones in the sewers. He was well aware a sword was useless too, but at least he could flourish it. Perhaps kill a drone, if he was very, very lucky. Kill one for Emil. Perhaps he could do it without getting angrier.

He was spitting sparks as he approached the stairs in the dark. He had ceased to delude himself that he would have any chance without drawing on the energies that anger raised in him. He hated this, but while his power was not as great as the Brotherhood's it was useful, and he could not deny it. He thought of the manifest injuries done to the Family by the Brotherhood, and nurtured his anger. It grew now, like the tightening of a steel band around his head, until it seemed his eyes must open wider than the full moon and turn inwards, paler than the skin of the dying children. His foot came down on a loose board. The creak in the dark was the clashing of swords against leather in the sewers. He shuddered involuntarily as his anger grew into a black thickness that threatened 129

to pour from his throat. Wait, wait, he thought. Let it grow.

He tasted his own blood in his mouth.

He looked down at the main room of the shop, consciously adjusting the wavelengths of light to which his eyes were sensitive. He had never had his son's flexibility in the use of the power; in him it found expression more in destruction than in creation, but such minor changes were easy even for him.

A body lay on the hard stone flags of the emporium's floor, dressed in a tattered artist's smock, its right hand grasping the minuscule window shutter of a massive antique-looking doll's house, one of many which rested in an alcove to the right of the long mahogany counter. It took Dominic a moment to realize it was the Doll's House, so carefully had he made the duplicates that surrounded the original.

Another man lay down at a tangent to the first body as if anxious not to get too close to it. He was a grubby ghost against the dark floor, and a hat lay in the dust near his dark-haired head. His lips appeared to move in a whisper.

Dominic wished for his son's gift of hearing.

Suddenly the artist's left arm convulsed, thrashing wildly against the air. Blood flowed from where the arm struck the raised slab on the floor of the alcove in which the Doll's House rested. The dark-haired man grabbed the arm and held it flat against the flags. It went limp almost at once. This was a dangerous way to treat a fit, and Dominic knew enough medicine to know that, but this clearly wasn't an ordinary convulsion. What the hell was happening? Were they Brotherhood agents, and if so were they Montague's men or the

Grandmaster's? He shifted his weight and looked out of the tiny window at the head of the stairs, trying to see if there were others on guard outside. The street was full of grey drifts of ash. Dominic felt sick, and remembered his waking burst of the power. Had he grown so reckless that he could reach out and kill without consciously being aware of the danger, or had something else prompted him? Both possibilities were disturbing.

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Emil grabbed the Doctor's shoulder. His grip felt like iron.

His eyes were open, staring unblinkingly straight up, like the porcelain eyes of the dolls on the high wooden shelves at the back of the shop. The Doctor took a slim flashlight from his breast pocket and shone it into Emil's eyes. The pupils did not dilate any further.

The Doctor got to his feet slowly and carefully like an invalid, brushing sawdust from his trousers. 'Creak,' he said, gesturing with surprised hopefulness at his knees. ' I ' m getting old.' He sought a pulse in Emil's wrist. The gesture was surprisingly tender. Temperature normal. Pulse normal. Skin-conductivity normal. Every visible sign of normal REM

sleep. The Doctor scowled. Sleeping didn't involve an abnormal ability to stare at the ceiling and a general appearance of being laid out by a team of trainee embalmers; at least not when humans did it.

The Doctor cleared his throat, and began to tick off points on his fingers. 'We came into the shop in the dark,' he said loudly, carelessly, his voice deep and Scottish, 'to escape the people outside. Mr Veber here, if that is really his name, which I frankly am starting to doubt despite his resemblance to the painter, stumbled in the dim light and touched that.' He gestured at the doll's house, a clumsy mansion-house affair in miniature, all stucco and crenellations. 'And whoosh, the unfortunate men who chased us in here are doing their best human torch impressions!'

Sighing, he turned to greet the fat man. The man whose light step on a creaking board, minutes since, had signalled that he and the paralysed Emil were being watched.

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Chapter 11

Dominic watched the man with the ridiculous hat from the landing halfway down the staircase where he was concealed.

He had heard only half of what the little man had said to himself and most of that he had not understood. But it was clear that some of it at least had been intended for his ears.

The man must have heard his mis-step and wanted him to think that they had just blundered into this shop, of all shops; just stumbled into touching the Doll's House, of all his doll's houses. As if it was reasonable to suppose that Paris was full of people happening to enter locked shops at night.

Oh no, Dominic was not stupid enough to believe that. The unconscious man and this newcomer must be cat's-paws, in the pay of the Brotherhood. The shop was deliberately cluttered with doll's houses, both around the counter and in the store-rooms at the back. They must have known which one contained the power. The unconscious man must be neither of the Family nor of the Brotherhood, but a normal man brought to test the house. That was clever. They would have needed to differentiate it from the decoys. He had left the real house in plain sight, on the assumption that the Brotherhood might believe that it was a replica and so that at least he could be sure it was not missing during shop hours. That had been a miscalculation.

He started to move down the staircase. The anger he had summoned up to force himself to battle tasted like metal in his mouth. It was at the point of spontaneous release. He must not lose it because the intruder was only a little man in a 132

stupid hat. Evil could dwell in a harmless-looking body, as well as in an ill-favoured one.

The man stared up the staircase, unafraid. 'Well, come down if you're coming,' he said. 'Some of us have better things to do than convincing irate shopkeepers of our bona fides.'

Darkness. A rolling motion like a ship. Roz realized she was slung over a shoulder. The hot stink of fur and blood told her who was carrying her. It had to be David Clayton. Her light-headedness told her at least some of the blood was hers.

She fought against shock. The sudden flare of a match striking against a white mass on the wall startled her. Chalk, she thought, and then she realized that chalk was too soft to strike a match against, and that the wall was cut into shallow alcoves.

A rat spilled out, pained by the light, its eyes albinotic and useless. The finger-bones it had been gnawing clattered to the floor. In the other alcoves, figures moved. Row upon row of ghouls, moving among the skeletons of the dead. Meat-people, in the bone-people's embraces.

The old man she had seen in the chapel capered into the light, standing upon a promontory of bone. He looked younger, stronger, less rational.

'Well, my children. My moppets, my precious, precious, lambkins. What should we do with this bitch who snatched away Daddy's morsel?' He ran his hand along Roz's neck.

His hand felt as ancient and solid as a wooden block.

Roz twisted out of his grasp. 'What is this place?' she demanded.

'She doesn't know.' 'She doesn't know.' The whisper echoed among the bones, picked up by a hundred distorted voices. Voices of clicks and stutters; voices of sibilants and gutturals; voices of angels and voices of machines.

'Ah.' The ancient man affected to drop a tear. 'The voice of the people is the voice of God. Hush, my moppets,' he added genially. 'I will tell her. These are the bone-yards under Montrouge. The vast and plentiful fields under the Red Hill 133

of Paris. Here bodies rot in the dark, and here are the piled enamel houses of over a hundred years. Years of plague and famine and war, years of plenty and of peace, all have led here, to the ossuaries and the sepulchral vaults. Here, I made my dominion. Welcome, my dear. Welcome to the vats.'

And the things cried his name like a litany: 'Montague, Montague, Montague.'

The doors and windows of the doll's houses slammed throughout the shop, as if a million argumentative mice sought the last word in a million domestic arguments.

Dominic's fury burst into a maelstrom of light and sound.

The after-images of a thousand electrical discharges hung like blue-white veils in the air. Scraps and tufts of debris, the stuffing of raggety dolls and the shavings from wood-carvings turned and turned in the blue strobe-light. The heads of a thousand china dolls revolved with a sound like matter being tortured. The cool of the shop became bitter and hot with ozone, and the Doctor's hair stood on end like a dark halo.

'Yes, but it's not new, is it?' he shouted, backing towards an empty alcove as sparks of static danced around his shoes, approaching flash potential. 'A little poltergeist activity, a bit of telekinesis, a touch of bio-chemical paranoia. Have you ever considered a career in the theatre, Monsieur Montfalcon?'

A bolt of blue-white fire sizzled past his ears, and blew a harlequin doll into a shower of black and white confetti.

'Or politics?' the Doctor shouted.

Tucked away in a dark alcove of the shop, a box of penknives flexed open its cardboard heart. Each knife shuddered and clicked open its longest blade. Dominic was on the ground floor now, his power touching and inhabiting almost everything. He strode towards the stranger. Although he could barely see the man through the red mist that hung before his eyes, he didn't need to see. He felt with the material of the shop itself. He was it, and it was him. He was the dolls, and 134

he was the knives. And he wanted to cut and stab, and cut and stab. The knives, hovering for an instant, prepared to dart into the intruder's unprotected back.

The night was calm and crisp, and from the trees along the banks of the Seine, the scent of non-genetically engineered greenery pressed itself in upon Chris Cwej like the dawn of the world.

Chris eyed Jarre's back nervously as the grey-coated detective strode along the waterfront. He had been ill-prepared for the accusation that Jarre had thrown in his face, but dishonesty being, as he had once heard the Doctor put it, the second-best policy, he had set his blandest expression and lied like a criminal under a psychoprobe. That is to say, if his internal feelings were any guide, he had lied embarrassingly badly with the feeling that the top of his head was swelling up and blinking on and off like a traffic indicator.

He had feared that Inspector Jarre, being without the skull-piercing,

memory-decanting tools of the thirtieth-century investigator, would have to have some compensating instinct. Some near-mystic rite of primitive detection that would have seen through the lies at once. An irrational image of the detective as a tribal shaman had spun into his mind.

Ordinarily it was easy to forget, when travelling with the Doctor, that the past had depth like an ocean. A thousand years before Jarre, men had consulted entrails to find out murderers, a thousand years later they had peeled minds like grapes. Where in the evolution of the policeman was Jarre?

How mad was it to feel that he might spot a lie like a sniffer-out of witches, or a cackling soothsayer?

When Jarre had lowered his eyes, hooded under his beetling brows and heavy eyelids, and help out his broad bony hand for Chris to shake, a great feeling of surprise that he had got away with it had swept over Cwej, threatening to make him giddy with excitement. Excitement, and underneath it a twinge of guilt. He was lying after all, and even in the best of causes he could feel his father's cool disapproval, back in the past that was the future.

He noticed, sheepishly, that Jarre had stopped and was looking at him sideways from a doorway. "That is it.'

Chris looked through the iron grating in the dark wood door. 'The Café Fantômas,' he breathed softly. The lurid magazines he had perused in the TARDIS library in his hurried research had sketched the smoke-etched lines of this building into his imagination.

Jarre nodded. 'The worst dive and parlour of vice on the quai St-Bernard. The house where Vidocq organized his cut-throats and made himself a thorn in the fleshy side of the Gendarmerie.'

'I thought Vidocq was a detective?'

'He was, the greatest detective. First, though, he was the greatest thief. He was a ruffian, a coiner, a card-sharper, a murderer by repute if not in fact. The Prefecture of Police at the time recruited him as an *agent provocateur,* and the eventual founder of the Sûreté Générale, in this very hell-hole. We aren't supposed to put this part in our moral homilies.'

Chris's face lit up. 'A Slippery Jim!'

'A what?'

'A man who was the slipperiest thief of his era, caught and set to catch those worse than thieves. It's an old story that I was told as a child. I never dreamt it had a basis in fact.'

'There's another part we aren't supposed to tell. In 1827

Vidocq was forced to resign from the Sûreté. He set up in business but his paper-mills were crippled by intrusive regulations, changes in employment law, visits from agencies within the Government. By 1833 he was reduced to scraping a living running a private enquiry service in Paris. The Government closed it down. No one knows why. It's not even in the files I've seen. He died alone, unloved, poor, without respect. That's the real tradition of the Sûreté. It doesn't give a shit.' He knocked hard on the dark wood door. 'Come on, I'll buy you a drink.'

On the fringes of the great hub, that core of stabilized space-time from which the great colonizing expeditions of the 136

Quoth had gone forth over two thousand five hundred million pattern-lifetimes before, a group of youngsters gathered.

Their tutor, a demi-oldest, slow and ponderous in its thinking, childed them gently into their positions. <It is time to begin. W h y are you not preparing? W h o knows how long this new Cluster will be in conjunction with the Edge?> The patterns dropped in inexorable geometry across its body.

The young Quoth stirred in the shallow contracted dimensions of guilt. One, bolder or more foolhardy than the others, let its feelings leak out in the patterns that dappled its surface.

<What is the purpose of the messages, Ancient? They have never been answered. Our race is alone in the universe. > The demi-oldest extended its million limbs into all the friable crannies of space with a good-natured gesture of resignation. <It is a matter of good manners; nothing more nor less. > It twitched; breaking and remaking wormholes in the localized Riemann tensor fields of the seventh dimension.

<Are you so blighted that you would take matter from the Outer Voids without establishing that it was not already claimed by another

race? I am saddened, deeply saddened. > The young Quoth shuddered, but more out of form than from any real fear of tutorial discipline. The Old One's body was already remaking itself into the long string-like form that would generate the harmonics around which their message of Quoth culture and history would be entwined. In that form it could not threaten them with the painful remetriciza-tion of space-time that the wormholes would have caused in their seventh-dimensional extensions. Succumbing to the harmony, they let the patterns build and radiate out from their bodies, first the simpler mathematics and then the more detailed histories and philosophies.

Elsewhere, Quoth scholars were at work. The Cluster that had recently approached the Very Edge of Quoth Space at speed was still being studied at a distance. Its velocity and configuration had been mapped by the Surveyor class and matched against those detected in the past by Quoth Rememberers.

The Cluster was the same puzzle as all the others that had 137

been surveyed across the long history of the Quoth. It was rigid without being symmetrical, changeable without being amorphous, too great for the senses even of the augmented Surveyors to measure. The Historians were sure though that it was a New Mass, not one that had ever before come into conjuncture with Quoth Space, not one that might contain lost survivors of the Great Outward Urge. In this they were partly right. The Cluster had never been in contact with Quoth Space before, but unknown to the scholars it contained Quoth who had.

Emil felt pressure within his skull like poisonous ants crawling over his brain, like the black and purple weight at the start of the worst migraine in history. In his mind's eye he saw pictures that came with an alien commentary played on his other senses. They came with a taste like burning tar, with a pain in his vestigial organs, with the slow background murmur of distant trumpets. He was reasoning furiously. He couldn't wrinkle his nose and know for sure that he had done it, but he could still think. The message - however it was conveyed to his brain - must, he decided, be causing his senses to respond in odd ways. There was a disease - the name of which he had forgotten - which caused people to see sounds as colours; and some of the opium-eating poets had written about such sensations. Emil wondered if this was something similar.

One pattern was repeated often. Impossible to say how often. A name? An identity? They called themselves something unpronounceable. Not

a sound, nor a letter, but it had a meaning. The Communicating Ones? The Speakers? Those-Who-Talk? It was the most ancient term in their language of shapes, an archaism reserved as a reference to their race. The Quoth, Emil thought. That would do.

Later he was to wonder how so much experience was embedded in his brain within so short a time. Later still he was to understand how. Now, however, the history of the Quoth spread out before him like part of his own memory.

Better than his own memory; oils to watercolours. Although 138

Emil had sometimes caught himself dreaming in colour and had within the dream thought, 'Red, I am dreaming in red', his dreams were normally pale in comparison to the vivid pictures that now flooded through him. He was the unsensed observer of the Quoth's greatest triumphs, and their greatest tragedy.

<This is the tale of the Fall, and the First Blight. It has been held in the bodies of the Quoth who saw it, even those so old that the pattern in space is all that remains of them, and they can no longer communicate as we do. Watch the movement of it in my body, oh children. Make my patterns out into the void, so that others may know us. >

< We watch and make, Old One. >

The Quoth had been obsessed with the patterns of things from their earliest memories. In that ancient time, they had existed solely to form pleasing congruencies of form and substance. During this idyllic period they were immortal and required no visible sustenance. Myth, Emil wondered, or had the Quoth in truth their own Garden of Eden?

<Then came the First Blight, and this was the manner of its coming. In those times all the world was flat and dense and infinite in extent and the energy on which we live was in all places and all times. To eckward and and ward there was no darkness, and the future was an open plain before us. Thus we made many children for our pleasure and glory. >

< Unlike now, Oh Old One. >

<Yes, my beautiful, few children. This was twenty-thousand billion pattern-lifetimes ago. Things then were as unlike these cold times as eckward is unlike andward, or nukp differs from sarrki. Now watch, and attend. A group of Quoth became obsessed with the making of

children. Their offspring would be the finest, the most brilliant, the most beautiful and the most perfect. This was their crime. Some say they offended the gods - if there be gods - by patterning thus, for the gods - if there be gods - are the finest, the most 139

brilliant, the most beautiful and the most perfect, not the offspring of the Quoth. No, not even you, my dears, so be still.

Others say it was no god, but something vast, jealous and unknown, a thing that wished all Quoth ill, but yet could not simply whelm us with power external but sought some devious way to harm our race. Be it god, or unknown, fate or chance, it wove thus: the first blight upon the Quoth was that our children were born perfect. >

Emil watched in wonder as the Quoth history unfolded. It seemed that they were truly immortal, ageless and unburdened by the need to gather or hoard food. Their tasks, self-imposed, consisted of the creation of vast works of art, constructed from their environment and themselves. Each Quoth amended its own patterns the better to fit in with the theme of the great changes sweeping across their race. They were thinking beings, though, and changed willingly, not by instinct or compulsion. Emil eavesdropped on their greatest arguments over the fitness of the pattern. Some, the most diligent, tortured themselves to adopt a personal pattern that they hoped was most harmonious for the whole, in spite of any personal difficulty. Others made the minimum changes to their own bodies, and preferred to ride out some changes in the race's harmony entirely, deeming them unaesthetic. Yet despite these disagreements, they had no violence and no wars.

Individual Quoth held a pattern for a particular length of time. This time, which was fixed perhaps as a fundamental of their biology, they made the basis of their histories. Emil found it difficult to identify. Since the Quoth were immortal he could not relate the time to a proportion of their lifespans, but dimly he sensed that subjectively it was as long for a Quoth as a year might be for a human. There was nothing in the visions he was experiencing to provide him with a temporal frame of reference that would relate

'pattern-lifetime' to a human scale of measurement. The world of the Quoth's far past was a seemingly infinite flat 140

layer, bounded above and below with some dense undulating material, sealed forever from sun, moon or stars. There was neither day nor night there. To the Quoth, it was paradise.

Within that thin layer they built their greatest works; patterns stretching left and right, forward and back, eckwards and andwards. Emil could neither clearly sense nor understand how the Quoth's patterns extended into those final two dimensions, but it was clear that the dimensions referred to were not up and down. Within that thin layer, the Quoth bred more Quoth and wrought larger works.

They were not a sexual form of life. Which was, in a way, a relief, Emil thought; scientific curiosity was one thing, being cast as the Cosmic Voyeur was quite another. However, they did seem capable of a kind of romantic passion associated with an odd mechanical mode of reproduction. They built their children from raw material - 'birthing' or 'protoquoth'

matter - taken from the layer itself and assembled with conscious, almost infinite care. The parents were those whose patterns suggested the references to be used in the assembly.

It was as if two humans could decide to have a child that would be guaranteed the mother's hair, the father's nose.

Quoth parenting groups could be composed of any number of pattern contributors, although the necessity of being able to work closely together placed an upper limit on the number within the more well-patterned areas of their world. The parents were drawn together by mutual admiration of features in each other's patterns. They would spend whole pattern-lifetimes inducing the rare birthing material to fuse and flow, until a new Quoth, the sum of all their beauty, was born.

Sometimes individual Quoth, enamoured more of themselves than others, would craft offspring like themselves in every detail, though in a race of immortals the impulse for self-replication was rare. Emil wondered what the Quoth saw in each other; for all the clarity of the images the Quoth themselves were infuriatingly blurry, l i t t l e more than pulsing bundles or skeins of light.

The Quoth's ancient paradise ended in cataclysm.

* * *

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< The children they built were perfect and so beautiful that all clamoured to make their own children after that design. The perfection, however, was that of stasis, and the great Blight of stillness

and beauty spread out over us until even normal young tortured themselves into the frozen immobility of the Beautiful Quoth. >

<How did the First Blight end, Old One?>

<It did not end. They are frozen still for all time, all those who fell victim to it remain there, without change or hope or new experience. I and the Old Ones who were made in the primal lands, but who rejected the false perfection of the Frozen Ones that would have ended all Art and all making, flexed our bodies in the way that breaks open space and let the time-winds sweep us where they would. >

< And so we came to Quoth Space? >

< Yes, so we came here. >

Emil's knowledge of astronomy was not great. His scientific studies had centred on physics and chemistry, but he had often gazed at the sky. The vision of the shattering of the Quoth's world revealed a sky more wonderful than any Emil had ever seen before. He saw it, although he knew that the Quoth did not have eyes. He smelt the burnt ash taste of its winds, although he knew the Quoth had neither noses nor tastebuds.

The sky was an incandescent mass of stars, burning with a ghostly indigo light. What could cause that, Emil wondered.

Why were the stars all identical in colour?

He was glad now that he had studied, but even so much of the history was beyond him. Briefly he pondered what these visions would have seemed like to an uneducated man; a vision of Hell perhaps, or the Apocalypse of Saint John? The seething layer of alien life splitting open under the violet pulse of the strange stars; the opening of the seventh vial?

Suddenly there was a movement within the surface of the world, pulverizing its crust and hurling matter up into space.

These sights must have looked like Doomsday. Emil strained to understand what was happening. The Quoth's memories 142

had things all askew, he thought. They pictured their world as a cylinder and their patterned layer as a thinner cylinder wrapped round below the world's surface. It was impossible that there could be such a world; any mass sufficient to support life would be pulled into

a sphere by its own gravity.

Newton's equations showed that.

His mathematics faltered as he watched matter volatilized, and massive fragments were hurled far into space. One such fragment of the pattern, referred to in the Quoth's memories as the Node, had contained a pitiful fraction of the Quoth race. Torn from their Art by the cataclysm, without the resource of birthing material to fuel expansion or hope for the future, the Quoth within the Node drifted for an unknown age of pattern-lifetimes. During that time there were few memories, until the voyaging node fell towards a blue-green world, with a large dead moon orbiting a centre of gravity within it. It was Earth, of course, Emil had seen that coming.

Then there was chaos, and blackness, and the Node shattered among an area of the Earth that even filtered through the Quoth's perceptions looked, Emil thought, like . . . well, like nothing on Earth. There were no solid shapes, only the vague three-lobed Clusters. In this new alien world, the Quoth almost perished.

Immortal, they could yet die of violence, and perhaps also of despair. For a time their hopes were revived by the detection of birthing material, but though the Quoth explored the group of Clusters from which the trace came and made it their new home it proved finally to be barren. This new environment, a great seething Void in which chunks of alien material, none of it useful for their propagation, hung suspended by unknown forces, was loathsome to them. Repulsed, they could not bear to interact with it. Dormant, without a purpose, without the spur of increase to activate the changing patterns of their bodies, they waited. Seventy-two million pattern-lifetimes elapsed, without change, without purpose.

Emil started adding up in his head. If the Quoth had landed on Earth before human civilization had arisen, perhaps, four thousand years ago - a valid assumption, Emil 143

felt, in view of his inability to recognize anything - and had remained dormant until recently then the Quoth must still live substantially faster subjective lives than humankind to fit so many pattern-lifetimes into four thousand years. If one pattern-lifetime equalled a subjective year, and the Quoth fitted seventy-two million of them into four thousand years -

Emil winced. He was no genius, although he had once been able to

become one for brief periods. He really needed to see his fingers for this one. Yes, a Quoth must live at least eighteen thousand times faster than a human being. That must be why they were never seen, moving so quickly they would be invisible. Emil felt his head swimming. The ants began to tread methodically rather than randomly, spiralling inwards. Then everything exploded.

The messages stopped. There had been no response. The time had not been wasted, however; the Miners' preparations for the extraction of the birthing material had been lengthy in order to ensure that no Quoth would be lost in the ensuing chaos. Experience in other Masses had shown that there could be a destructive reaction as the vital birthing matter was incorporated into the Miners' own patterns for transpor-tation into Quoth Space.

When the birthing material was torn from the three-lobed Clusters in which it appeared naturally to settle in these strange domains, the Clusters would explode. The remaining two-thirds of the matter that formed them would tear apart. Strange events as yet unexplained by Quoth science would follow. Indeed, some Quoth scientists had speculated that there was an absolute barrier of scale, the so-called Sensory Limitation Effect, beyond which events transpired over timescales too vast for cause and effect to remain meaningful.

The expanding two nodes of each lobe would develop velocities beyond the biologies of the Quoth, and swell mightily as they moved apart in random directions, disturbing the configurations of the surrounding Clusters. In that vortex more birthing matter centres would be bom, surrounding and in 144

time merging with the newly enlarged lobes. Those new lobes would be carried by their new velocities far beyond this Mass, and some might in time strike other Masses elsewhere in the Cosmos. Some might even be flung in the direction of Quoth Space, but they would be moving at too great a pace to be captured by any Quoth structure. This waste was regrettable, but there was no life here to harm, and the benefit to the Quoth far outweighed the damage to these tenantless Clusters.

Emil's eyes snapped open and his consciousness was flooded with real sensations. Across the room, the Doctor's eyes caught his in the same instant. How had the Doctor known through this chaos that he was conscious? Too much was happening to take in. He felt light-headed, almost as if he was having an out-of-body experience. Please no, he thought, I've only just got used to this one. The room was hot and

smelt of steam baths and chemistry. Urine? Chlorine? Ozone? Emil felt the hairs on his head starting to stand on end.

Across the room the Doctor was cowering in an alcove as great sizzling bolts of blue fire crackled off the surrounding surfaces, leaving fatty smudges of carbonized dust. Between the bolts Emil saw the source of this energy. A fat old man in a long patched nightshirt with a nightcap half off his head, supported on wisps of hair flung out as straight as lines of iron-filings in a magnetic field. He was so dazed it took him a moment to recognize his own father. Why was Dominic trying to kill his friend? Was the Doctor one of the Brotherhood? Surely not, or why would he have helped Dominic avoid the men and the watcher outside? Perhaps to make me show him the Doll's House? It was too hard to decide. Emil missed the icy genius he had been able to invoke before he had been trapped in this body.

'Stop it,' he screamed. 'Make it stop.'

A penknife zoomed past the Doctor from behind, taking a slice off his hat. Dominic turned, the anger washing off his face at something. Unseen by the engrossed night-shirt-wearer, the Doctor brought the first thing to hand down on the back of Dominic's head with a resounding clump. The 145

Babushka doll split with the impact, spilling smaller copies of itself out from its innards.

Worlds within worlds, Emil thought. There was something in that, and then he fainted.

The Doctor looked at the body of the fat toy-shop owner, and then moved over to take Emil's pulse. He pushed the shattered doll with his foot. 'If only they knew they were building a model of the Universe,' he said.

Chapter 12

A dark silhouette moved behind the light. The pain in his head made Chris squint and the lamplight refracting through his eyelashes made the figure loom large and distorted, but he knew who it was.

'Now we are going to talk candidly,' said Inspector Jarre.

A woman barely wearing a scarlet dress - that under other circumstances would have made Chris blush - placed a tray of objects in the circle of lamplight. Incongruously, he was reminded of the magician at his fifth birthday party; the one who had flung down his cards in disgust when confronted by three generations of trained observers.

The memory helped him force a chuckle, although his mouth felt dry and slack, and he wondered sickly about concussion. He tried a situational analysis. He had been hit, and hit hard. Probably with a cosh or another blunt instrument.

He was undoubtedly a prisoner. In the Cafe Fantomas? He couldn't be sure. The fight drove his surroundings into limbo.

Standard disorientation technique. His chuckle had sounded thick and nervous. Good, that was how he wanted it.

'Come on Anton, untie me,' he whined. ' I ' v e been hazed when I joined the gendarmerie. And get the girl to put the tray away. I don't need any memory training.' If he had learnt anything from the Doctor, it was the importance of being under-estimated. If he could make Jarre laugh, make himself out to be an imbecile, let the Inspector claim he was only testing a new colleague, he might get out of this.

'No, you don't, do you?'

No smile there.

'However, I would like you to look at these items closely.

Do you recognize them?'

Chris looked hard at the tray. He wondered if he could kick it up into Jarre's face and overturn the lamp. His hands were tied behind his

back to a chair that was probably heavy, but he thought he could lift it and run at the same time. He exerted an exploratory tug. The chair was fastened to the floor. His legs were tied as well. Jarre was not taking any chances. Why was he so scared?

'These papers, for instance.' Inspector Jarre scooped the contents of Chris's wallet from where they lay on the tray, and shuffled them like a hand of cards. 'They look accurate enough, at least superficially. Nevertheless, your manner and competence alarmed me.'

Chris tried to look useless. Lord knows he felt it. He had been worrying about his identification papers since the Doctor had whipped them up with a collection of plastic wheels, hollow circles and pins, a two-colour biro and something called a John Bull printing set, and signed them with the names of the Minister of the Interior and the Minister of War.

The fact that they had met every inspection to date did not fully remove the lack of confidence that the Doctor's bargain-basement methods of forgery inspired. Chris's face dropped as Jarre continued: 'So I sent a telegram to the Alpine Massif.

The answer came before I left the Préfecture this evening.

Shall I read it out?'

Chris shrugged. 'If you wish, Inspector.'

'Jean-Paul Armand as well as can be expected after skiing accident, stop. Will be in bed for another month, stop. Regret transfer will have to be delayed, stop. Trust no inconvenience caused, stop. Captain Rene LaVey, Préfecture de Massif. So for the second time, and you will I am sure forgive me a certain lack of patience that results from my having to ask a second time, who are you and what do you want?'

He raised the yellow gun from the tray and aimed it between Chris's eyes.

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The clock on the wall stood at five minutes to midnight.

'Before tomorrow, if you please, Monsieur.'

When she was young, she had a book that sang to her. It was a simple mechanism, a laminated set of memories and a voice box. It sang the

song of the Tortoise in Swahili, and in Xhosa, and in the shaman's tongue. Ufudo, the Tortoise, was old and wise, cautious and infinitely prudent. It was the only animal ever to have tricked Tsuro, the Hare. It won the race between them because it knew all the short-cuts, and because it had hidden members of its family along the course. They had all looked alike. Or was it that they all could look like whatever they liked? Roz could not remember. The book had taught her one of the first lessons of childhood: cheats prosper. Of course she had also learnt that from her sister.

The voice of Ufudo was the wind in the reeds by the black river. It was the hiss of air from the space-dock, the metronomic *click click* of the spacesuit life-support. They build them that way for children, to reassure them. After a while the noise is a comfort that can no longer be heard. If it stops, the silence is more piercing than any alarm. The suit was a custom j o b ; not recommended for children under six years. Roz was five and a half when she had trekked out from the family estate.

Despite the suit's multiple fail-safes, she was dangerously dehydrated by the time she saw the vision.

The physician whose house Mirakle had invaded clutched and rubbed his pale hands together as if the room was cold. In the grate logs roared and sent their dying sparks up the chimney. Mirakle felt sweat gathering in the folds of fat around his neck. The fear had not died.

Mirakle watched the doctor draw the thin grey sheet over Tomas's face. There was no breath to make it rise or fall. The Grandmaster was dead. At least this version of him was, and it was in Mirakle's power to make that death permanent. The involuntary thought made Mirakle squirm internally.

The physician took Mirakle by the arm and led him away 149

from the bed. Away from the raddled mattress and its inanimate burden.

'Drink this.'

Obediently August seized the offered glass. The gagging aroma of absinthe clutched at his throat. He swept his arm out in a convulsive gesture of disgust. The glass shattered in the grate.

August groped for some explanation of his action. 'He was my life,' he said. The words fell like dull ingots of some dense metal. It was only

half the truth, he realized. Tomas had been his justification. Every evil whim, every shady business deal, every patient fleeced had been attributed in Mirakle's heart to Tomas's influence. His holy aims, the salvation of France and the prevention of the horrors the Brotherhood's pre-cogs had seen in the dim glass of the future, had justified anything. Had justified everything. Now the justifier was dead, and Mirakle could only face his own evil. It smelt of aniseed.

' I ' m sorry.' He pressed a bundle of francs into the physician's hand. 'I don't drink absinthe. Not any more.

Please leave me alone for a moment. I need to think.'

When the Grandmaster had begun his charades they had been intended solely to confuse Montague, but gradually they had become the cornerstone of his strategy. With the power he could force people to think as he did. More than mesmerism, it was as if a little version of Mayeur had lived in his victim's brains, reaching out at times to take control of their consciences. Slowly, imperceptibly, he had extended his control; through Mirakle's circle of rich patients, through his own political contacts. By now the members of an inner core of the French Government were him. Almost.

The flaw was that he had only one fragment of the Doll's House, only one handle on the power, and periodic exposure to it was needed to keep the spell functioning. Without it the victims would gradually revert to their own personalities.

Which meant that if Mirakle simply put the tiny chair in his pocket and left Paris for a month or so, he would never have to worry about the Grandmaster again. Then there would only be Montague to fear.

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It was finally time for him to decide what he was more afraid of.

In the Pink Room, the burnt and torn body of Major Henri exploded into cellular life.

It screamed.

'I move house and yet I never move house, my house moves with me. My house is me,' the Tortoise sang. The shell of the tortoise was blue and it groaned as it moved as if its house was a great weight. It came padding across the Culaan Patera towards the volcano Prometheus, its clawed feet kicking up faint puffs of sulphur dioxide. Its tongue stuck

out of the corner of its mouth flashing in and out like a light blinking.

'If your house is so heavy, why do you carry it?' Roz asked curiously.

'Why do you wear that heavy spacesuit?' the Tortoise snapped.

'It's not the same thing.'

'Isn't it?'

'This keeps me alive.'

Ufudo, the Tortoise, blinked its rheumy eyes. 'They all say that. But you know what I say?'

' N o ? '

'If you don't take it off sometimes, you won't feel the benefit.' It wheeled to the left, plodding downhill now towards a spring of sulphurous aquifers. It drank noisily, breaking the dark, frozen surface of the pool with a yellow-stained claw. After a while it turned round and climbed laboriously back up the slope to her armoured feet.

'One more thing.'

'What?' Roz said.

'I've known Tsuro the hare for a long time.'

Roz waited. ' A n d ? ' she asked.

The Tortoise spat a piece of silicate out of its leathery mouth.

'He's not as tricky as he likes to think. I should know.'

It winked.

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A sharp pain struck Roz in the cheek. The sounds she was not hearing stopped. The memories of her long, eventless, trek across the Culaan Patera burst in an orange-red haze. She thought briefly of tortoises and wondered why. Probably because of Montague's face, she decided. It was as cracked and broken as old tortoise shell, and it was only millimetres from hers.

'You wouldn't believe me if I told you,' Chris said. In his head he was

working through the dialogue of the film noir classics he had watched alone in the TARDIS cinematograph.

Jarre would say, 'Try me.' Then Chris would lie again. Pretty soon, thugs would come in and beat him up, or Jarre would fire the gun. He was fairly certain that it would not affect a non-psionic, but it was an alien weapon and it was making him nervous. There had to be a way to short-circuit this whole interrogation.

'Oh yes, I would,' Jarre said. 'You think I can't tell when a man's telling the truth. Particularly, if you will forgive me, such a transparent man as you seem to be.'

Chris felt his face turning pink. Good, turn it into anger, tell the truth and make it seem a lie. H e ' d seen the Doctor work this trick.

' I ' m a policeman from the future. The safety of the Earth is at stake.'

Jarre nodded thoughtfully. 'Agent Gris's theory. He thought you would come.' He stared at Chris hard, appraisingly. 'I must admit I was expecting someone shorter. You play the part of a simpleton most convincingly, Monsieur Doctor.'

Jarre motioned and slim female hands began to untie Chris's bounds. He heard giggling as the hands untwined the ropes from around his thighs, pressed on his hard muscles.

Embarrassingly, he felt a reaction. That would never do, not if he was supposed to be the Doctor. He thought about wet fish and the Carnival Queen. That did it.

Inspector Jarre was still staring at him. Chris met his gaze.

I ' m the Doctor, he thought, I can do this. Jarre looked away first.

'I am sorry for this misunderstanding,' he said. 'The resources of the Shadow Directory, such few as remain, are at your disposal.'

In sheer panic, Chris yelled, 'Get me something to eat, I ' m starving.'

Pain, burning, blindness. Then light. Zig-zags of colour searing the retina. Still greater pain. Henri dragged himself up onto the bed. His forearms collapsed under him, shaking. His side was a single vast scar. The room's healing aura must have re-energized when the psychic

attack broke off. He was still dying, but there was a chance. If he could only find the box.

Clumsily he fumbled in the pocket of his blood-stained yellow coat. His hand found nothing, and a moment's confusion threatened to overturn his reason. Why was it not there?

Why was his coat yellow?

He racked his crippled memory. Setting the decoy, fleeing with Mirakle. The decoy, the new Tomas he had grown, had died too slowly, sending its pain cascading outwards into him. Tormented by the pain, his body had failed, its nerves tortured into sympathetic death. Of course, that was it. He had died, and his pain had broken down the barrier between him and the nearest person that he had subjected to his domination. He was Major Henri now.

As Henri he remembered. The Doctor's spurious pontifi-cating changed nothing. Perhaps the Shadow Directory could be subverted from its aims so easily, riddled as it was with Jews and Freemasons, a mere shadow of the covert arm of the Revolution that had once answered solely to the Directory; but the Brotherhood, *he,* could not. France would not fall before the Germans. It would establish its culture over Earth and beyond, and God would bless it and make it prosper.

Not that he cared what a mythical god might do.

If only he could find some way to stabilize this form without the power in the chair. If only he could avoid another death.

* * *

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Montague's breath did not have a smell. It was clean as steam, inhuman. He slid a liver-spotted finger under one of the leather straps that criss-crossed her face and twanged it.

Its edge caught the fresh graze on her face. Lower down, the bonds dug into her shoulder. 'Please pay attention,' he said.

'It's quite rare I have an audience for my court.'

Roz snapped fully awake; her mind ratcheted into the conversation as if she had extensive practice of lying on rock altars, wrapped in black knotted hide. 'Other than them?' she said. There was precious little

neck movement available to her but she could glimpse the shuffling of Montague's creatures out among the bones.

He laughed. Good, she had amused him. Prisoner training.

First, be awkward, be interesting. Get involved. Give the jailers a challenge, but a slight one. Give them someone they think they can break. Boring prisoners are disposable. They are usually killed early to show the authorities the terrorists mean business. There were studies that showed captives grew to depend on their captors, and a trained adjudicator could work that backwards, sow dissent, get them at each other's throats. There was a snag, of course. She remembered asking Konstantine who got killed first. Prisoners who are too interesting, he had said.

Montague was waving his gnarled hands in the air, indicat-ing the things that moved just out of eyeshot. 'Perhaps I should say it's rare I have a perceptive audience. My followers are shockingly limited intellectually, with one or two notable exceptions. They seem to actually prefer stupidity.'

'Force of habit?' Roz said sweetly. Under the bindings she conducted a few isometric tests of the wrapping's strength. It was tough. Animal hide, she hoped.

'Oh hardly, they were among the greatest minds of their generation. Artists, painters, philosophers. I ' m very proud of my little collection.' Something gruesome moved wetly at the edge of Roz's vision. Montague sniggered. ' I ' m afraid they have rather run to flesh. But that is the privilege I have brought them: the power to make their bodies their canvases.

To live their every impulse on the outside.'

He was getting chatty, Roz thought. Perhaps he was even telling the truth about his freaks. Stimulation of the psi-centres of the brain could cause all sorts of knock-on biochemical effects. Acromegaly, Mitchell's Syndrome, even classic paranoia. Not that Roz had anything against paranoia.

Chris had never realized its value. H e ' d need an induced psychosis just to reach a sane level of caution. Oh yes, she thought. That's why he's on this slab, and you're about to rescue him, of course.

Montague's unnaturally hard hand gripped her jaw, twisting her head a fraction sideways. The wound on her jaw tore open again. The warmth of her blood made Montague's hand seem even colder. 'I would prefer your full attention.' His voice trailed off into a rasping coughing fit, spraying spittle onto her cheek.

Roz gauged the time between coughs, without flinching.

The wrinkly was on his last legs. Unfortunately some of his friends had brought extra. She needed to preserve his temporary good humour. 'Who are the exceptions?' she asked.

Perhaps she could get some sense out of them.

Montague smiled. Roz caught a sour smell from the gaps in his yellow teeth. 'Here's one now.' A grey mass veined with silver moved into Roz's eyeline. A bone tree? No, a multi-headed serpent. No, a mass of crystalline fronds piercing up towards the arched roof of the catacombs. This was a great intellect? A frantic scratching from its upper spires reached her ears. Impaled on the pointed rods of living glass a more humanoid figure writhed, crystal spears through its shoulders and through its eyes.

'A critic,' Montague said. 'He drew my attention to an offensive painting. A shame really; generally his judgement was sound.' He tapped the crystal form lovingly. It made a sound like wind chimes. 'Lefevre here volunteered to be his gallows tree.'

Chapter 13

29 November 1897: 00.15 a.m.

In one of the luxurious guest rooms of the Café Fantomas, Chris held his head in his hands and groaned. All he'd wanted was to get Jarre off-balance. All h e ' d wanted was the misdirection of some honest disbelief. Instead h e ' d got mistaken identity, a bottle of wine, a plate of steak and potatoes, and a big dose of conspiracy.

Jarre had been only too keen to unburden himself. It seemed he, or the people he represented - who were a secret branch of the French police - had somehow got hold of the Doctor's diary when Ace disappeared into the time rifts.

Naturally they had expected the Doctor to turn up eventually looking for her. Now they thought he, Chris, was the Doctor, and they were likely to look on a companion as being distinctly second best. A companion would just be Doctor-bait. Possibly short-lived Doctor-bait. He had to run with the deception.

The trouble was that Chris didn't feel like the Doctor.

He knew he didn't understand how the Doctor thought. He hadn't got a chance in Gehenna of being taken for him. Not if Jarre's people had any firm intelligence. His best hope was that they hadn't, but Jarre's crack about expecting someone shorter had been worrying. He might stand a better chance of being taken for one of the earlier Doctors. The Doctor's fifth regenerated self had seemed pleasant and open when Chris 156

had met him. Fresh-faced. Chris had had to live down that very description during the whole of his career; surely he could use it now?

Except what he knew about cricket could have been written on a not very amusing tea-towel.

Downstairs, Jarre re-read the file on the Doctor. It was one of the duplicate records he kept in the Cafe Fantomas in case he had to take the Directory fully undercover, out of the sight of the Ministry of War. It was scanty, scarcely a dozen sheets of foolscap.

One thing was known for certain: the Doctor could change his appearance.

He ran through the known possibilities. Too old, too short, too fancy, too strange. He paused. Could Armand be the fifth of the Doctor's known bodies? No, Jarre decided. The arrogance in the man's voice when he had demanded food spoke against his being the quiet, gentlemanly fifth identity of the Doctor. That confirmed it. This boor must be the sixth persona of the mysterious traveller. There was even less about him in the file than the others, but what was clear was that he had been a large, overbearing figure, quick to speak his mind and not worried about seeming a fool. Still, Jarre knew he should on no account be underestimated. Even the little that was known of him suggested that he had lost none of the Doctor's guile or cunning.

'Behold,' Montague smirked. 'I have .. .'

'Nothing up my sleeves?' Roz muttered, and knew in a second that she had pushed too far. He smashed her across the face, left-handed. A crack of broken bone sounded loud in her ears. Goddess, that really had hurt him more than it had her! His little finger hung at an angle. Distracted, he tugged at the flaccid skin and the yellow sliver of bone, worrying at it with flat worn teeth.

The impatient cries of the audience galvanized him. He took the finger in his right hand and snapped it off, throwing the grisly morsel to the dark shapes. Scuffling broke out, until 157

he quelled it with his coughing laugh. 'An old trick first, my children.'

He held his left hand out into the light. Gradually, like a plant reaching up to the sun, his finger grew back. First a skeleton of bone, then veins and flesh and muscle. It was still old though, no patchwork here.

Where was the mass coining from, Roz wondered. Or the energy, for that matter?

'Next, my second oldest trick. The first real power I mastered. My dolls will dance for us, and then I have a task for them. A multiplicity of murders.' With a curious delicacy he caressed Roz's face. 'It is your fault that I must do this.

If you had not killed Tomas on his cross, the pain, the resonance, of that death would, I believe, have reached out to kill any remains of his mind that he might have left in those he had infected with himself. Now I must kill again.'

Roz craned her neck to get a glance at the list he held. A week in Paris

tending bars had given her a fair grasp of current politics. The names read like a roll-call of the French Government.

Chris dug into the steak, secure in the knowledge that the earliest strain of BSE was almost a hundred years in the future. Jarre, who had entered the room while he was eating, fidgeted with a glass of white wine.

'Well, don't tell me that you didn't expect me to eat and drink,' Chris said. 'When you disturbed me at my hotel, I was just sitting down to a grilled turbot. The least you could do was feed me.'

'When you can tear yourself away from your midnight feast, Doctor, there's something I think you should see.'

'What?'

'I suppose you might call it a historical re-enactment. One of my few remaining agents has just reported it to me. One of the public figures who changed their positions soon after Mayeur's death has been found dead.'

'Poisoned like Mayeur?'

'No, crucified.'

Marcel turned the notebook over and over in his hands. He hated late-night duty at the Caserne de la Cite. At night all the drunks, whores and madmen came out and whined for justice. 'Tell me again what you have here. Vital fresh evidence about Dreyfus, wasn't it?'

'Not just Dreyfus, it's bigger than that. It's vital I talk to Anton Jarre. The Government and the Ministry of War have been subverted.'

The man panted, rolling his levantine eyes behind his pathetic half-moon spectacles. His greasy black suit, with large silver cuff-links showing vulgarly at the wrists, made him look like a down-at-heel lawyer. Marcel hated lawyers, and Jews. He toyed with the notebook. 'This is so vital that a particular inspector of the Sûreté has to be got out of bed by messenger, plucked from his wife's thighs if need be, so that the information can be conveyed straight away to the authorities, both here and at the Ministry of War?'

'Yes.' The man's eyes were large and bright behind his spectacles.

'Really.' Marcel weighed the book in his hands once more, and threw it against the wall. It hit hard and spilled down the wall, shedding pages.

'Trust a Jew to excuse treason.' He reached across the desk and dug his hand into the fabric of the man's black coat, twisting it up in his fist. ' I ' m holding you . . . '

A strained, hysterical laugh burst from the man. The gendarme flushed as he loosed his grip. A curious mixture of shame and guilt washed over him. Dreyfus and the Jews were a distant threat. This man was real, and in pain. The gendarme found himself saying, ' . . . for your own good, mind.

I'd hate it if anything happened to a good citizen of France.'

A ghost smell of aniseed pierced his head. That was it: the man was drunk, merely drunk. Sapristi! Marcel knew what it was to have one drink too many. Suddenly the shabby man seemed friendly, admirable. Marcel could not even remember why he had thought he looked Jewish.

He came round the desk. 'The cells are quiet and dry. Sleep off your drink and we'll talk in the morning. If, *if,* mind you, there's anything in what you say, I'll get an inspector to look into it, but you must sober up first.'

In the cell, August cradled his aching head. His magic had suppressed an emotion, pushed at another. The influence would not last until morning. He could only hope that the gendarme's superiors would be more understanding. He had the certain feeling that he had made the wrong decision.

What a time to turn into a public-spirited citizen, he thought sourly. He poked at the straw-stuffed bedding, and settled down to get what sleep he could.

'Are you coming, Doctor?' Jarre shouted, his breath white as frost in the chill night air. The old servant had gone before them, and now stood in the illuminated doorway of the chapel that rested among the trees.

'In a moment.' Chris moved the oil lamp in his hand, letting the warm organic light and heat spill out. Something was wrong here. H e ' d felt

it since Jarre had knocked in a measured pattern on a door in a dark wall, and they had been shown into this wilderness. The roses were frozen, and they were black.

Francesque leant on the banister of the wrought-iron stairwell, and gasped. One more floor and he should be at ground level. Then he would need clothes, a doctor's white coat perhaps, a disguise to get him out of Charenton before any of the new staff dared to interrupt Major Henri's latest interrogation of the Directory agent. The pain in the left side of his chest was growing worse, but he knew he was going to make it. Ever since he had left the Pink Room he had been getting pre-cog flashes. The sky, the clatter of hoofs, a smell of orange blossom. He was going to make it.

'The nearer we get to the chapel, the less the vegetation is affected by the weather,' Chris said. 'Have you noticed?'

Jarre prodded a jasmine with his finger. It felt like a cold, wet plant, not like a frost sculpture. 'It must provide some shelter.' It sounded as if he was trying to convince himself.

"The plants are wrong too,' Chris continued, memories of his father and mother's neat garden nestling in his mind. It was a relief to find something he knew about. "They're all out of season. Growing in the wrong soils. Flowering with the wrong colours. This pure black pigmentation in the roses is concentrated delphinidin. It gives delphiniums their name and their colour.'

Jarre glared at him. ' S o ? '

'So it doesn't give roses theirs. It's entirely alien to the species' chemical composition. It could not be imparted by hybridization or breeding.' It would take detailed genetic artistry, he thought. Hard science. Future science.

'Master Tomas was accounted an excellent gardener, sir.'

Chris almost jumped. The man who had let them into the garden had left the chapel doorway and was now at his shoulder. He had moved perfectly silently. Too silently.

Chris caught Jarre smirking. Thank heavens for naturally good peripheral vision, and the better-than-natural night vision he had spent his first month's stipend on. Hardwired in, it had survived his

brief flirtation with body-beppling, and had another five years on its warranty. ' H e ' s the agent who reported the murder, isn't he?'

'Of course. Fortunately he wasn't here when it happened or no doubt they would have killed him too. Doctor, Monsieur Kasper. Monsieur Kasper, Doctor - what did you say your name was again?'

'Oh, quite unpronounceable, I assure you,' Chris said hurriedly. That at least was practically true. He changed the subject. 'Kasper moves very quietly.'

'He does, doesn't he?' Jarre said, approvingly. 'Kasper was the finest cat-burglar the roofs of Paris have ever produced.

He can put salt on a sparrow's tail if he wants, our Monsieur Kasper.'

Chris felt a moment's nausea. The past was always only one step away from barbarism. Hunting sparrows, ugh.

Didn't they eat blackbird pie in this century?

'Perhaps he should show us the body,' he said.

Nurse Evette always ran through the Pink Room on tiptoe. It was the doctor's territory, and nursing staff were forbidden to enter it without a physician in attendance, but it was smack in the middle of the Asylum. It cut ten minutes off her route.

Besides, it was somehow restful. She always felt more awake after passing through it, and its single patient was no trouble.

Normally asleep when she started her shift, she had seen him awake only occasionally when a doctor had wanted her to attend him, but he had never been violent or disturbed.

This morning something was different, but it took her a moment to realize what it was. The man was not in his bed.

Instead the sheets were pulled up on another bed, a huddled mass motionless under them. Curious, Evette slowed her pace. Had he died in the night? Surely the duty nurse would have been alerted, but why had his body been placed in another bed? She twitched back the sheet.

Claudette Engadine ran the bone comb through her hair, and wailed

voicelessly as a handful came away with the primitive implement. The indignity of it all. Down the bone-slopes from her temporary shelter among the refuse of the dead, her lord moved his puppets in the spotlights of his followers'

eyes. If hate or disgust could kill, the thoughts and feelings in Claudette's head would have burst the villain's heart in his thin wizened chest, or would have set the sparse dry hair of his blotched scalp aflame, like straw burning.

The thought of his body revolted her. The thought of her own, of what had been done to it, was scarcely better. She was an Engadine; a leader of fashion, not a thing to be remade to a man's impulses like the paper dollies she had dressed as a child from scraps of muslin and lace. He had not even found her desirable in the form in which Tomas had left her, but had changed her further into a more fitting subject for his feeble lusts.

Buried in her mind was an order to kill him. She did not 162

need its prompting. He was still tormenting the Negress.

Claudette felt only gratitude for that. It was another hour in which she would not have to minister to his desires, but the dolls that danced around him, leaping into the air and click-ing their wooden and porcelain limbs like insects, made her head ache. First she thought they were alive. Then she thought they were not. Then she thought they were. Watching them was like watching the pictures in the fire on a winter's day. Only the pictures were all distorted and awry. They were *les fayettes:* the little fairies of her granny's midnight tales.

Even more than Montague, they terrified her.

Marcel savoured his black cigar. Smoking on duty was strictly forbidden, and once he would have made sure everything was spick and span before handing over to a new officer. These days, though, he just did not care. He had his cigars and a bottle of wine, he had eased his regulation boots off under the desk, and if that little prig Rober, the captain's lickspittle, wished to berate him for it - well, let him.

Even the prisoners, the few there were in the cells, were quiet. Good, the last thing he wanted was another row on his shift. The night before last had been bad enough. Three street-walkers and a dwarf had been fighting over a painting, and had been locked up in adjacent cells to sober up. They had still been arguing at six in the morning.

A woman's scream broke through his reverie. It came from the end cell. That was the cell into which he had put the man who had proof of Dreyfus's innocence. As if the military courts would make mistakes.

Odd; he did not recall there being any female prisoners.

Possibly the clothing workers at the factory of the family Valjean had been fighting again, and one had been charged with affray before his shift had begun. She could have been huddled under the blankets in the cell's far corner when he had locked the man up. She'd probably just got a fright when she stuck her head out for air and found a male prisoner snoring at her feet.

Grunting, Marcel levered himself up from his seat and 163

pulled on his boots. Typically Rober was nowhere in sight.

The man was never late unless something unpleasant was happening, and then he would disappear for hours at a time.

Marcel drew his baton; it might be amusing to rattle the bars and give the prisoners something real to worry about. A vengeful malice had risen up in him as a reaction to the gut-wrenching start the scream had given him. He could not remember now why he had not beaten the truth out of the man in the first place.

Marcel moved slowly towards the last cell, bending to get his massive frame through the narrow low corridor. A spare oil lantern hung on an iron hook opposite the cell doors.

He took this and lit it with one of the white phosphorus matches from his pocket, striking the match between finger and thumb. A yellow, oily flare of light spilt into the cell through the tiny inspection hatch. It took Marcel a second to make out the shapes in the darkness, lit only by the fluttering patchwork light.

No, Marcel thought - his eyes unaccountably reluctant to rest on the central area of the cell - there was another source of light. The moon, shining in through a series of holes in the cell wall. He was sure that they had not been there before.

The holes were too small and too high up to be any use to the prisoners, even for passing messages to the outside. Marcel was damned if he could see how they had been made. They looked like holes that vastly long needles might have made if thrust down from the distant stars, through the rough brick of the cell wall. The thought

was somehow more shuddersome than the scream had been.

The scream! He had forgotten it. He had shied away from its implications. There was no woman in the cell. There was just a corpse. Just the body of the old levantine, and the thing on his chest. The thing with the voice of a woman crooning to itself in the dark, its features stained yellow in the lantern's light. The thing whose war-cry had sounded like a girl's scream. His mother's tales of the little people born into flesh.

His eyes jerked away from the minute figure with its green jerkin and garish red belt and the ring of tiny knives, bright as 164

pins, skewered through the scarlet material. Its existence was unendurable.

Rising from it to the holes, Marcel's eye caught shining lines made visible by moonlight, thin as spider silk. With a cry of horror he realized what they were. Puppet strings. The idea that this creature was not just some freak or aberration in an ordered cosmos, but that it had a controlling intellect at a distance, linked to it by some uncanny means, reached him like a revelation. He was not a thoughtful man, as a rule, and this thought coming almost from outside was worse than anything else.

He thrust his black metal keys into the cell's iron lock. He would smash this thing, this elf, this doll. Break it, and bury its body in the latrines. Hang the Jew by torn blankets from the door. Block the tiny holes in the wall with shit and dirt.

So clear; so simple. Then everything would make sense again.

The body was nailed up above the little chapel's altar. The whole north end of the chapel narrowed to focus on the life-sized cross. It might have been designed to make it impossible to look away from the crucified figure. Its body was that of a youth but the face, that part of it which remained, was old and locked by death into an expression part sly and part exulted.

Chris felt sick, but he couldn't show it. The Doctor was immune to nausea, and he was the Doctor. This was worse than the bath. Even Jarre looked green under his baggy skin. Only Kasper seemed unaffected, a presence at once solid and barely perceptible; like the shadow of a block of marble.

The cause of death was the head wound, that much was obvious, but

it was also clear from the blood at the wrists and ankles that it had been inflicted after the victim had been lifted up and nailed onto the crucifix. Why crucify someone and then shoot them, Chris wondered. At the very least it was hardly sporting. He winced. Was that how the Doctor thought of humans? A protected species, trembling on the verge 165

of extinction? Once he would have thought that laughable.

He had been raised under the banner of an Empire that commanded a thousand worlds in the name of humanity.

Only later had he encountered technologies that could have crushed Imperial Space like an eggshell. Technologies and other things.

'What do you make of the wound?' he asked.

Jarre glowered, and Chris remembered how infuriating it was when the Doctor drew people out with obvious questions. 'Militarily speaking,' he added quickly, remembering that Jarre had transferred back to the Sûreté from military intelligence.

Jarre considered. 'It wasn't made by a French army rifle. The spread of the wound's too large. Too much muzzle velocity. We sacrificed power for portability. Could be German.'

' S o ? ' Chris prompted. He could get to like this. No wonder the Doctor was always one step ahead. You just had to nudge, and people did your thinking for you.

Jarre was looking round the chapel nervously. 'So . . . ' he echoed. 'Someone with access to foreign weapons, and His voice hesitated, then picked up speed and volume. 'And how did they get the body up there? No room to stand either side, no scaffolding, no hooks for pulleys.'

'No sign that the cross was taken down,' Chris added, and then felt foolish. If there was not room to lift a body, there would hardly be room to lift a body fastened to an even heavier cross.

Jarre looked as if he had said something profound. Of course, Chris realized, how had the cross been raised above the altar in the first place? The altar was built into the floor.

There was no means of access round it to the cross. The builders wouldn't have put up a wall with a crucifix on it and then built the

rest of the chapel round it. Would they? Jarre was moving his hands over the carvings on the altar rails. A carved creature lying on its back with a single giant foot stretched over its head like a parasol moved under his hand.

The altar and the floor into which it was embedded sank with the grinding of hidden gears. A black slab of darkness, 166

pierced by steps leading down and to the left, was revealed by its passing.

Jarre followed Kasper and the Doctor down into the dark.

German, my arse, he thought. The man had been shot with a high-powered sniper rifle. One of the specialist weapons devised by the Shadow Directory using the technologies derived from captured alien artefacts. Back-craftsmanship, the technicians called it. A couple of the models had been seized by the Ministry of War when the Dreyfus incident had cast doubt upon the loyalty of the Directory. Someone had been handing them out.

He wondered if the Doctor knew that. There had been a nasty undercurrent in the way he had said ' S o ? ' and paused.

Working with an alien gave him a slightly disgusting feeling.

Chapter 14

The Doctor stood in the passage outside the attic and looked at the stars through the casement window. The rain had thinned out, leaving a steaming mist that clung to the rooftops. The sky had a pre-industrial clarity. No defraction, no light-pollution to destroy the icy pin-points of the stars.

Illusion, of course; the industrial revolution had cut its way through France, like the rest of western Europe, albeit in ***a***

form peculiar to the country's temperament and history.

Out there, small firms made up of men trained under the old guild system vied with the massive textile mills of the outlying districts which employed predominantly female workers, cheaper and less protected by the Confédération Générale de Travail. Out there, the metalworks would soon fire up for the dawn shift-change, spilling burning fossil fuels into the winter air, ignoring the law passed in 1892 that limited the working day of their women employees to a maximum of eleven hours. It was possible to see the coming century from this vantage point alone. A hundred years dominated not by aliens or ideologies, but by an underlying dependency on a mineral slime and the ethics of the production line.

Now, however, the sky was clear. The gas lights were out below, blown out into shattered and melted fists of glass and cast iron by Monsieur Montfalcon's power.

Above the pale thin houses, Capella and Aldebaran shone down. To the left of Aldebaran, Neptune and Pluto swung bleakly in the night. Dead worlds. Mars, with its underground 168

crypts and cold warriors, was below the western horizon. He could not make out Charon, Pluto's moon, or the more distant Mondas. A portion of his mind performed a set of rapid calculations. Charon was eclipsed by Pluto now. As for the cyberworld, it was decelerating on its way back into solar space. Light from it would be blue-shifted as it shed the relativistic velocities the cyber-engines had produced. His eyes made allowances. There. Almost overhead, hidden by the eaves of the houses, in the direction of the galaxy M40.

A faint smearing of light. The Cybermen. A billion souls wrapped in their machines, coming to Earth to die, if not at his hands then with

his connivance. Less than a hundred years hence, a genocide written unchangeably into space-time blinked balefully at him. Perhaps he should start looking at the gutter.

He knocked on the attic door.

'Tea and toast?'

The painful sounds of human grief came faint through the door. The sounds ended in the shaky confusion of assumed human fortitude. So admirable in many ways. Such courage in only one life.

The man opened the door. He looked dreadful. He wore the painter's body like a shroud. It was clearer than ever that he wasn't Veber. Small things. Fewer creases round the eyes. Something in the expression behind them. The Doctor pushed the tray forward and watched as the man reached for it. ' I ' m not sure about the arms,' he said. 'They always try to tell me they'll ride up with wear, what do you think?'

<I cannot understand your concern, Truthseeker. Why must we conceal ourselves from our ancestors and our descend-ants? The Home Worlds are bare lustrums distant, they pull at our memories like the five forces. We should contact them. I argued as much when their Miners came into the Cluster.

Now that we have drawn apart again it is even more vital that we do not miss this opportunity.) The surveyor flexed its fine-layered surfaces in puzzlement.

Truthseeker felt a twinge of unease, and a fleeting pattern of 169

horror rippled in response over its outer limbs. It clamped down on the reflex. No, painful as it was to he to its old friend, policy demanded it. <The records of the Home Worlds are scanty,) it patterned. <We must be certain that these Miners are not scavengers from a Blighted Cluster. The Oldest are regurgitat-ing their central memories to ensure the match. It requires the breaking open of many frozen patterns. Besides, do not your studies confirm that movement in this *upward*> - Truthseeker used the unfamiliar term cautiously - < direction are limited and are always followed by a return to the universal median energy-level?)

The surveyor crinkled its communicating surface modestly.

<Yes, one of the Surveyor caste's primary laws of macrodimensional

motion. What goes *up* must come *down.* >

<So we must return to the conjunction with the Miners'

worlds in time. Remember we have all the time in the universe. >

Out-argued but barely convinced, the surveyor's layered flesh slid aside and dark tendrils of doubt, thick and mottled, plucked at the interstitial veins of space-time. Truthseeker ignored its friend's tiny involuntary display of distrust. It was, after all, perfectly justified in its suspicions.

Later, when the surveyor had withdrawn from the common space, Truthseeker collapsed its limbs and huddled in the close-bound comfort between the fifth and sixth dimensions.

The crisis was coming, and it could see no way to prevent it.

Soon there would be no more excuses and the Oldest would demand reunification. They did not understand the horror that Truthseeker had discovered. The Home Worlds were not a haven from the Blight, but the central core of it. He could feel it, in the very structure of the Home Worlds. An emptiness. There was no real birthing matter there, only a hollow mimicry of it.

< Whatever gods there be; makers of my makers' makers, > the surveyor prayed, < grant me guidance from the past. Teach me craft. Bless my arts. Forgive me the betrayal of my friend. > Doubt twisted in its core. Truthseeker had done so 170

much, helped so many. In the crisis of the last Blight when the Quoth had been driven mad, it alone had kept its senses. It had guided the mad Quoth into an orderly evacuation, not the insane exodus into the outer voids that the hellish beat of the Blight had demanded. It and it alone had directed the great armada of the exodus to a safe haven in this birth-matter-bearing Cluster. The surveyor thought it could not imagine the loneliness Truthseeker must have experienced while its fellows suffered from the Blight. Then it tried to imagine it, and wished it had not. The thought of having no one to communicate with was profoundly disturbing. Under the Blight, Quoth do not speak or think. Its great force presses their minds down to a dimensionless point, and they follow its insane dictates with the methodical obsession of the mad or the mindless.

Had Truthseeker joined them in their mad tasks, the vast and meaningless re-ordering of this Cluster into the perfect image of the

one they had fled? The long madness that had faded only gradually as the worlds re-formed into their old structures. Or had it shut down its senses for a hundred million pattern-lifetimes, a dead mass clenched in the forging chamber of a mad world? No wonder it had begun to grow apart from its kin.

A jagged shape of certainty formed in the surveyor's patterns. It would ask the Oldest.

The scents of childhood awakened memory. Emil found his hands were holding a tray. He looked down. Thick-cut French bread, toasted and lightly buttered, a scoop of red j a m at the side of the cream-coloured plate. A blurred dream of cylinders and living light died at the back of his mind.

Orange juice - out of season, except in the greenhouses of the rich, he thought confusedly - vivid in a tall, straight glass with a minuscule umbrella stuck in it. The umbrella reminded him of doll's-house furniture, and the tray tottered in hands that would not respond to his commands.

The stranger, the Doctor, was at his side in an instant, balancing the tray on one hand, muttering apologies. Guiding 171

Emil with the other back to the bed with the faded green counterpane and the faint scent of lilies.

'He's all right, you know. Simple bruising, nothing more.

A little lump on the noggin. He'll be right as rain soon.

Blasting strangers to ash like a young man again, unless we can talk some sense into him.'

Emil winced. The Doctor's words washed over him, barely making sense. His mind felt dislocated, like the broken wrist he had suffered as a child after falling from a tree. His father had come running, eyes afire. Concerned and angry at the same time, he had grabbed Emil's broken wrist with rough madness, burning his fingerprints into Emil's dark skin. His mother had opened the door of the house in the rue Trianon and got as far as 'Did you have a nice day in the park' before his screwed-up bawling face and his father's livid anger had told her of the accident. She had not spoken to his father for a week. Aunt Jessica had made peace between them in the end.

joining their minds so his mother could read her father's memories,

see for herself that he had not been to blame.

The memory had remained with him although the damage had been minimal: half an hour's pain, and a further hour with the bones in his hand untwisting themselves and re-positioning under his skin. It had made him feel sick to see the movement, so slow and so deliberate, so unlike the sudden changes of his anger, or of his father's flash-furies. The bones had fitted back together perfectly; only the burn had never healed, perhaps because he had always thought he deserved it. Now he felt the same queasiness in his whole body, not because the movement was there, but because it wasn't. With a sense of shame he realized he missed the power. Without it, who was he?

'You cannot know,' he wept, clutching at the worn sleeves of the Doctor's jacket. "This is not my body, and yet it is. It itches like harsh wool on the inside of its skin. When I move, its reach is wrong. The face in the mirror isn't mine. You know, the ghost of your nose that you never see unless you squint down. I see it all the time, and it isn't right.' His voice was getting louder, and faster. He had both hands on

the Doctor's cream lapels now, tugging insistently. A metal badge on the lapel scratched his right hand. He barely spared it a glance. 'Who am I?'

The Doctor broke his grip easily. His hands were firm and cool.

'Believe me, I do know. I'd like to tell you it gets easier, but . . . ' He shrugged and, turning Emil's right hand palm upwards, traced something with his finger. Emil almost jerked his hand away. Palmistry! He loathed the occult, but then his eyes caught what the Doctor was looking at. The tiny wound was healing, slowly but surely. On the white flesh of Emil's wrist an oval splodge raised itself out of his skin. A burn. A fingerprint.

The Oldest Inhabitant was a frozen patch of space, almost beyond dimensions. An art-work carved out of its own past, floating in a void of time-like space. A memory wrapped in a faint bundle of life. The surveyor felt its thoughts as it approached. The Cylinder of Heaven, the ghosts of perfect children trapped on the event horizon of beauty, the long slow fall from gracefulness.

<Oldest,) it sent. <Truthseeker is wrong. I think the long pattern-lifetimes alone damaged it in some way. It fears what we have yearned for since the loss; the final reunification and melding of the

Quoth Communion. Please help me to know what to do. There are no new young to ask. I beg you. Help me.>

The Oldest stirred. The surveyor settled itself for a long wait. It would take the Oldest a thousand pattern-lifetimes or so to remove its attention from whatever historical incident it was reviewing.

It had been waiting only a dozen patterns when the messenger passed by, its body a mass of news from the communal spaces. The surveyor shuddered as it deciphered the patterns swirling over the messenger's extrusions into four-space. Reported cases of Shadow were coming in from the outlying regions; this Cluster was becoming unsafe. The Oldest must countermand Truthseeker's advice, support those 173

who favoured immediate reunification. It was their only hope.

Dominic opened his eyes and checked his hands for burns.

The old habit comforted him slightly, but he was still puzzled. Why wasn't he dead? Montague's agents would never have left him alive. Could the strangers be working for the Grandmaster's faction? He had always hoped to re integrate the Family into his plans. Dominic had grown to rely on that. He raised himself up on his elbows. He was lying on his own bed.

The two strangers were standing in the doorway. Dominic squinted. If he tried hard he could see the fire in people's bodies; trace the lines of heat. Boost them. Boil a brain in it> skull, or fry a heart in its own blood.

He concentrated, thinking of the torments the Family had suffered at Montague's and, yes, at the Grandmaster's hands.

The lines of fire burnt brightly. Hot blood flowing around the body to the heart. His eyes traced a web of veins. The pattern was wrong, not twisted like Emil's heat-patterns at the moment of shape-changes, but fundamentally different a!

the very basic level, as if they had grown to an alternative design. His eyes followed the pattern. Two hearts!

One of Montague's sick aesthetes, then. Power rose in Dominic's brain. He felt the energy of the stranger's blood increase. Softly, softly, until both the hearts would burst supercharged with seething blood.

Darkness. Shame. To have come to this (don't think of it). I am one of

them now (must have been one for a long time).

Don't think that. The power distorted them. Them, not me. I was clever. (Oh yes, so clever.) The nurse's face. Don't think of it.

Keeping the power in check. Secret, confined. In its narrow box. Not like the freaks. Need more power, now. So little in her, the small amount she had absorbed from the Pink Room over the years. Bad nursey, taking short-cuts. Punished, now.

How a face dry-eyed can be in tears. Can't think straight.

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Don't know if I ' m the only me that I have left. Can't even rely on me any more. Damn him (me), why didn't he (I) drink the poison?

I need more power, enough to be me again. Only one other possible source here. The Directory agent with the ridiculous name. He had it (saw the future). The residium from the psychometrist was still in him. More than the nurse. Much more.

The thing that had been Henri, that had been Tomas, that had been Jean Mayeur, clattered in its stolen nurse's form through the empty corridors of the asylum.

Emil checked Dominic's pulse. It seemed steady, but his father showed no sign of consciousness. The Doctor rubbed at the lobe of his right ear. 'Someone's talking about me,' he said, his voice high and querulous. 'Is it me or is it hot in here?' A faint, unnatural flush crept over his face. 'Turn down the air-conditioning Susan, h m m ? '

Francesque Duquesne crouched in the grounds and listened for the baying of dogs. He had been stumbling around in the damp for hours, getting colder and wetter. The temptation to go back to the womb-like serenity of the Deep Ward was strong but the visions beckoned him onwards. Surely it could not be far now.

Chris whistled softly. Whistling in the dark. Behind him, Kasper held the lantern high, casting sharp shadows down the narrow stone steps.

Jarre leant back from the step ahead, his eyes wide from peering into the darkness. 'I hesitate to criticize, Doctor, but do you have the least idea where we're going?'

Chris considered. What was an appropriately Doctorish response? The

only thing he could think of was a piece of classical music. He opened his lips to say 'Going underground,' but the words never got out of his throat.

Something slammed into his right shoulder. The force smashed his face into the brickwork, and the rough stone 175

cracked against his cheek-bone. The pain came half a second later. Whatever had struck him had run through his shoulder, pinning him to the wall. All this in an instant while Jarre's breathing sounded like it was going to burst his lungs; and Kasper's silence was worse. Chris forced his head to turn against the stone, scraping skin away with the violence of the movement.

Kasper thrashed on the ground; dozens of long rigid spars of bone driven through his body. A thick wash of blood flowed down the steps.

'Oh Christ, oh Christ, oh Christ,' Jarre whispered. The outlines of Kasper's body were peeling back, and Chris saw that the spars were not sticking into him. They were sticking out. They were his rib-cage. At least twelve feet long, the bones rattled on the floor, skittering like spiders' legs. They were alive. One long spear of bone vanished out of Chris's limited line of sight. He realized that was what had speared his shoulder.

The thing lurched with the sound of knuckles cracking, and scarlet fire seemed to burst in Chris's shoulder as the bone thorn moved to and fro. Kasper was growing. The man was turning inside out: turning into ravenous intestines that ended in sucking mouths; turning into a living bone spider death freak thing. Chris got as far as shouting 'Get the g - '

before it was on him.

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Chapter 15

Francesque edged around the wall, his hands brushing against the moss-covered stone. He moved as if the wall was surrounded by the narrowest of ledges; as if it stood at the edge of a slope leading down into the pit. His shoulders were trembling as much as his hands now, and his skin felt taut with cold and the numbness of fatigue and illness. The white coat he had found barely covered his upper thighs and offered only the faintest resistance to the chill.

Somewhere in the wall he knew he would find the gate, but it was not the gate he saw ahead of him now, but a great light.

Nor was it his eyes that he saw with.

When the grey hospital van drew up, pulled by two snorting dappled horses, and the nurse pulled him inside, he was too weak to resist. Its interior was a blur of white. A fog of medical scents assaulted his senses. Ether and oil of orange.

Then he saw what was wearing the nurse's skin.

As he died, his last thought was that if his precognition had been wrong about his escape, then there might still be hope that it was wrong in other matters. France could yet live. A whisper hovered on his lips: 'Liberté, égalité, fraternité.'

Jarre reached down into the Doctor's belt, pulled up the golden gun and fired.

The creature that had been Kasper burst like a soap bubble, whirling in a stream of lambent chaff down into the crystal muzzle of the gun. The eyes of the humanoids on the gun's butt lit up with a tiny smug green light. What was left of 177

Kasper, a tattered mass of organs and broken bones, impacted the steps.

Jarre grinned shockingly. 'Effective!'

The Doctor slid down the wall, clutching at his shoulder.

'Bugger,' he muttered. 'What the crukk was that?'

Jarre began to have serious doubts about the Doctor's amazing

reputation.

Emil grabbed the chamber-pot from under the bed and flung the damp nightsoil over his father's chest. Hitting the cloud of power that hovered around him, it vaporized into a thick white wall of foul-smelling steam.

Across the room the Doctor dropped to his knees, out of the line of Dominic's sight, and rolled for the shelter of the bed. His motion was caught up in the scent of burning hair and skin.

Emil's hands pounded on his father's chest, in the instinctive remonstrance of a child's tantrum. 'He's a friend, he's a friend.' The body he wore gave his blows an unlooked-for strength. Dominic doubled over, wrapped around Emil's fists by the pain of the impacts; a livid fire burning in eyes that were all pupil. The wooden end-posts of the bedstead charred black with the wild divergence of his concentration. Then a rasping gasp broke from his lips, and his pupils shrank back to specks, surrounded by bloodshot tissue. The gasp died in a fluttering murmur.

Aghast, Emil lifted his great brutal hands from his father's body. What had he done?

Henri withdrew the needle from the agent's eye and licked its cold damp length. The power from the man's brain flooded into his body. Enough to fully heal this version of himself; this shell that commanded the intelligence services of France.

He could not afford now to lose his political power. Perhaps it was even time to take things a step further. Take back the reins of history. Montague's wild spree must not be allowed to disrupt the plan. Already things were fraying. It was unlikely that Mirakle was still alive, not that the sorcerer was 178

any great loss. Magic was dead. Only power mattered. His power.

Dominic floated on a cold sea. On either side, rocks black as basalt draped in night - unlit by any moon - stretched up into the darkness, height upon height. He tried to move his hands but could not. Were his wrists tied or were they crossed on his chest? There was a weight there. He waited for the familiar pulse of his own blood. It did not come.

Above and ahead of him a light broke, and a sensation of peace tried to insinuate itself into his soul. It made him squirm in resistance.

However much he tried to tell himself it had been for the best, that he had kept the Family alive, his actions had still been a betrayal. Ahead, if judgement waited in the light, he would have to face his son.

The boatman coughed.

Dominic opened his eyes fully, and two dull coins fell into the water.

Behind his head, a tall man in a long red robe punted the boat along, his face shadowed between a slouch hat, and a burgundy wrap wound like a gash across his throat. He looked like Aristride Bruant the cabaret artist, or the Red Death.

'Wait. Stop,' Dominic murmured in confusion.

'If you want. We could turn back.'

Dominic started, a wrench deep in his rib-cage. The scent of mint caught at his nostrils. 'Is that allowed?' he heard himself say.

The boatman shrugged cheerfully. ' I ' v e never seen the rule book, but I've known it done.' He took a paddle made of some rubbery yellow substance from inside his red robes, and passed it down to Dominic, who felt his hands come mysteriously free to receive it. 'You don't mind lending a hand, I hope? The currents are quite treacherous here.'

Up from the other side of the bed, the Doctor rose like a wraith. Grey wisps of smoke from his smouldering hair bil-lowed around his head. He grabbed Emil's hands and forced 179

them with surprising strength back onto Dominic's chest.

'There's still a chance.' Letting go of Emil, he reached into Dominic's mouth, hooking his tongue to one side with a practised motion of his thumb. ' I ' m going to try to restart his breathing. As I inflate his lungs, you'll have to work them manually.' He bent his head to Dominic's lips and began to blow into his mouth, gesturing at Emil like an orchestra conductor to time the thrusts of his hands.

'I was painted by Toulouse-Lautrec once. The real sitter was ill. A poster for some theatre or other. He said he liked my clothes sense,' the Doctor chattered in between his exhalations. 'I don't think the proprietor liked it.'

Emil felt his father's chest move independently under the flat of his

palms.

'He's alive!'

Lucifer growled. The sound was deep and resonant. Deep enough to be dangerous? Pierre could not take the chance.

'Hush,' he said, softly laying his hands on the dog's throat.

'Poor Lucifer, you can't understand why everything smells wrong here, can you? That's the smell of death, boy. We've come to the catacombs.' Lucifer whimpered in response.

Running his hand over the dog's head, Pierre could feel the hound's ears pricked back with fear. What could he see, or hear, he wondered.

Roz screamed. This was getting hard on the vocal cords, but she did not want Montague to catch on to just how pain-resistant an adjudicator could be trained to be. Just how stubborn and pain-resistant a member of her family could be He was more perceptive than she gave him credit for, though, or more schooled in the variety of human cries.

'No, no, no. You're cheating.' His ancient, mad voice grated on her ear. Goddess, he must be in his fifth childhood.

He ripped at the leather thongs around her breasts, exposing them. His hand traced the almost invisible scar on her sternum. Against her will, Roz flinched. Damn. Some things are too tied to memories not to trigger a response; they work 180

at levels below the will. She avoided the word 'subconscious'

even in her head; she'd seen it used to justify too many crimes- But she had to concede that things piled up, memories got embedded, thoughts lost. All but the really unpleasant ones. They just festered.

'I'll tell you what I ' m going to do.' Montague wheezed like an undead game-show host. ' I ' m going to fill you with my power. Make you immortal, Helen, with a kiss. And then when you're all healed, I ' m going to hang you on a tree to die again, and again, and again. Unless you tell me who you're working for, and your favourite colour, and your dreams.

Now I can't say fairer than that, can I children?'

'No, Montague.' A flat choral response like a tired con-gregation in church. Was she boring them? Roz hoped not.

While his attention was back on her he wasn't killing civilians with his living dolls.

Still, she knew her limitations. Whether Montague knew it or not, and who could say what was going on in his bald, liver-spotted skull, the healing was the one threat that she could not face. That, not the pain beyond it, left her no choice but to shift her hostage stance; to start seeming to cooperate more. The aches in her body, the scars visible or invisible, the slow grind of aging: these things *were* her. Accept no sub-stitutes. Heal them and what was left but memory? She knew too well that there was nothing more untrustworthy than that.

Memory could be chopped or edited or erased. It was too easily diced into ribonucleic acid and protein chains and rewoven to a new design. The technology to alter memory had existed in one form or another since humankind first distilled ethyl alcohol. By her time it was simple. It had happened to her once. At least once. How would she know if it had happened twice? The fact that it had been done with her agreement, at her crukking request, only made it worse.

Self-mutilation in the head. The inverse of people cutting themselves with scissors just to feel something; she had memories cut away to stop her feeling. Eventually the memories had come back anyway: her partner dying at her 181

hand. The smell of palm-greasing through the judiciary.

Guilt. She could not risk that happening again. If she had no scars, no aging, how could she know for sure who she was?

"The Doctor sent me,' she said. First rule of spilling your guts: keep to the truth until it really matters, then lie like the third-time winner of the Cretan all-comers Mr Fibber competition, as Bernice had once put it. Roz had never got round to asking what planet a Cretan came from.

'Ah ha. Aaaaah haaaa. I thought as much. I did, I did.'

Montague was practically clapping his hands. 'Who is the Doctor?' His tone became conspiratorial and petulant. 'Is he a pawn of the Grandmaster? If so, he should know I killed his master and wiped his blood like spittle from the sole of my boot.'

Interestingly, he seemed to have forgotten his earlier insistence that

the Grandmaster might somehow have survived.

Roz wondered just how mad he was. If he was just mad enough, she stood a chance of escape.

Chapter 16

The stairs ended in a laboratory.

A single glance confirmed Chris's worst imaginings. The room was packed with bodies. Bodies draped like the com-ponents of some complicated mechanism across black wood frames. He stared into the gloom, seeing parts rather than whole corpses; a hand pierced by silver wires here, a head flung back with its mouth clamped with a wedge of studded leather there. He realized he was looking for a particular body, for darker flesh among the forest. For Roz.

Jarre pushed past him roughly, impatiently, the lantern held aloft in one sweating hand. He had recovered it from the mess of Kasper's corpse and it burnt with a smell of fat. Since his strange, cool comment about the effectiveness of the golden gun, he had said nothing. It was giving Chris the willies.

The lantern's light sent shadows spinning into the room's mismatched corners. An expression, seeming compounded in equal measure of relief and frustration, passed over Jarre's broad features.

"They're mannequins. Just mannequins.' He kicked at a ruby-cheeked head that grew from the floorboards. With a crack of breaking wood the head came loose from the mahogany armature which had supported it, and rebounded with a crunch-ing thud into the tangled thickets of limbs that thrust wantonly forth from the racks and workbenches fining the chamber.

'Why would anyone want a hidden room full of dismembered mannequins?' His dark eyes were haunted. 'Why?'

* * *

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There was a narrow access path built into the wall of the catacombs by Haussmann's engineers. It had been a trial cut for a line of sewers that were never built; set aside as too expensive by the Prefect's successors. Pierre edged through it, Lucifer padding beside him. It should lead him past the site of the screams. Then he would decide where his duty lay.

Chris leant down and picked up the head. Its features were finely carved, worked as precisely as anything he had ever seen. He looked

for tool-marks. If there were characteristic slips repeated across the different body parts that might tell him whether a single artist or several were responsible for them. Yes, very likely. The TARDIS records would be bound to have a big section on the microscopic textural analysis of the works of nineteenth-century obsessives. Damn, he missed the Doctor. He could just see him juggling heads, tracing a band of body-part loving artists from a jagged chisel cut or a stylistic flourish in the cheek-bones. Things seemed to fall open at the Doctor's touch. Mysteries unravelled themselves.

Chris just dug himself in deeper. He set the head down atop a pile of hands, and picked up another. There were no tool marks. They looked as if they had fallen off the tree that way.

He saw Jarre was staring at him. Had the detective noticed the smoothness of the carving? Chris wished he had a theory to offer him. What could have done it? An alien cutting device? It would be a relief if he could think of a good understandable superscience gimmick; a tool so neat that a sculptor might go a bit nuts trying it out. Carve another head? Hey, why not - it only took a minute or two. A couple of feet? Sure, ten seconds tops. Give the man a hand?

Definitely!

The alternatives were not good. Psychic powers that made mass go away? That was a lot to swallow. H e ' d hate to see physics get that sort of mauling. Even the Carnival Queen had fitted into science somehow; if only as a per-sonification of a potential Kuhn Paradigm shift in the 184

way the consciousness of observers was collapsing mixed-state events. At least he told himself that now, after a week shut in the TARDIS library reading Findecker's *Der Nexus Doppelgängen* and an ancient children's book *A Brief History of Time.* Now that the beauty and terror of it was only the subject of memory and dreams. Even the stuff the Doctor did sometimes, the hair-raising things Chris had read in the TARDIS logs, like taking a lighthouse and a couple of diamond cuff-links and making a laser cannon, seemed like a friendly burlesque of the sciences Chris took for granted, rather than an utter rejection of them. The conservation of matter was fundamental, wasn't it?

'Uncanny, isn't it?' Jarre said.

Chris risked a terse nod.

'Why did the sculptor want so many carvings of politicians?

What can you do with a life-sized doll of a politician?'

'How familiar are you with French politicians?' Chris asked. 'Could you make a list of the ones who have been . . .

a h . . . immortalized?'

Jarre considered. 'I think so. They're good likenesses.'

'Right. I'll start collecting heads.'

Two figures loomed large in the haze. Dominic realized he was still in his own bed, looking up into the faces of his captors. One was the man with two hearts, who Dominic had taken for one of the Brotherhood; the Scottish man whom he had almost killed in the frenzy of his anger. The other was younger but just as much a stranger. Even so, there was something peculiarly familiar about him. There was a pattern underneath the grossness of the veins and arteries, like a spectre of heat. There were depths that shape-changers never altered; ways the Family had to recognize each other. This was like the ghost of such a likeness. With rising wonder, Dominic groped for an impossible hope. Aunt Jessica had told the Family that she had felt Emil's body die; felt its thoughts end, and y e t . . .

'Emil?'

The stranger bowed stiffly, and Dominic could see a 185

recognizable tremble about his left eye. Emil had pulled that face whenever he was nervous. Once he had stuck that way for a week, the skin crawling in a slow ruminative cycle around his eye-socket. That had been after the rogue faction of the Brotherhood had almost killed him; when Dominic's brother had brought him back through the sewers. He had wanted his mother to make it all better. She had been too exhausted. Her powers had been almost burnt out, then.

Dominic had thought about Emil's terror for longer than he wanted to remember. It had been then that he had finally accepted he could not defend the Family alone; could not stand against both Montague and the Grandmaster. It had not been a moment of choice, just a recognition of past choices.

Really, there had been no grand treachery, never a moment when a boundary was overstepped, only a slow encroach-ment of favours. Perhaps it had begun even earlier, with the theft of the Doll's House itself. It had taken him years to realize that the Grandmaster had

wanted it stolen.

By then he was consciously in the Grandmaster's service.

He had told himself that he was the only one of the Family strong enough to do the things that must be done. Then when the other children were born warped, when Emil died anyway, when Aunt Jessica no longer trusted him, he had wrapped up his guilt like a kind of martyrdom. Even so he had never expected that his martyrdom might give birth to miracles. He reached out wonderingly.

'How is this possible?'

The other man smiled. 'He jumped out of his skin. I ' m **the** Doctor, and this is my friend your son. We need to talk.'

Coming back up the dark stairs with the bag of heads, Chris noticed Jarre shudder as he came into the chapel. Nothing had changed there, and the automatic filters that humans carry i *n* their heads for blocking out horrors were already doing their stuff. As long as he didn't look at the corpse's eyes, Chris thought he could stand it.

'Symbolism,' Jarre said suddenly. 'Don't you see? It must be s y m b o l i c '

Chris felt his skin begin a slow migration across the peaks of his spine. A crucifix on a chain was symbolic. Two candle-sticks held across each other to hold off Dracula was symbolic. This was the real thing. Wasn't it?

Jarre was gesturing quickly with his hands, trying to keep up with the flash of his ideas. 'It's too clumsy, too slow for murder. It reeks of ceremony, of judicial killing. The Romans used it because they had the weight of the state to back it up.

They knew people wouldn't come and cut the sufferers down, but whoever did this couldn't know that. A man might be hours dying on a cross, gasping for breath as he dragged his chest up against gravity, giving his lungs room to expand.

There had to be a reason for doing it that made the risk of discovery acceptable. A statement they wanted to make.'

'I wonder.' Chris stared up into the eyes of the crucified priest. 'He

looks a meek, innocent enough man. Could he have been hated so badly that this was considered a just punishment?'

Jarre shrugged. 'He was part of a web of subversives. Not the centre, perhaps, but very near it. Whatever else he was, he was not innocent.'

'Why were you watching him?' Chris asked.

Rule two of Konstantine's guide to spilling the beans was to temper the truth to the minds of the hostage-takers. It would do no good to tell a Hith on a vengeance kick that its snotty race lost the war against humanity because they were basically carpets with delusions of adequacy, and that it had as much chance of having its demands acceded to as of forming a successful string quartet.

Her best guess at Montague's psychology was that, because he had spouted rubbish for so long and had so much of it believed implicitly by his followers, he now had as much grasp of consensual reality as a politician high on Juke. It was incredible what people would believe just because someone had the power to turn their bodies inside out.

She opted for a headlong attack. 'The Doctor is the emissary of your masters, worm. He is the messenger of the 187

powers you draw upon.' She scuffled in her memory for mystic gobbledegook from her time on the fraudster watch. It had been a mind-numbing three months of punishment detail for some dress-code violation Konstantine had dreamt up, to give her a taster of the tedium of medium-level Overcity work. Three months watching inbred Nobles with the IQs of gene-freaked meat-animals throwing their money at Swami Rhan-Te-Goth and his Mystic Brazier of Light. The brazier had been a holographic lightshow strobing at human hyp-notic frequencies, and the Swami's mystic powers had been two unregistered telepathic assistants, unpeeling the audience's credit-chip access codes as well as the truth about Great-Grandfather Muffin's mysterious last words. Still, he had used a very impressive patter. They had nailed him on five counts of access to banned literature as well: Prinn; Lovecraft; Von Juntz; all on datachip. Konstantine had flamed them with a service blaster, and had sworn blind in the rec room later that the Prinn chip had burnt with a green flame, and the Von Juntz with a red sulphurous flare. The punchline was that the Lovecraft had not burnt at all. The joke had been enough to make Roz read the Lovecraft texts in the Adjudication *Index Purgatum*. She had found them more adjectival than terrifying, but they had a certain style.

'He is more than man. He is the troubler at the gate, the walker with the thousand forms; the part of the idiot god which embraces the pain of reason. He is the thing from the void that mocks the blind apes of truth. He is the dark messenger, Nya . . . '

'Do not speak that name!' Montague shouted. A rogue muscle twitched at his temple. He screamed out at the assembled Brotherhood:

'Leave us; all but the sentries go about your tasks. I will speak with this heretic alone.'

Chris watched Jarre squirm. He hated to let anything out; that one. His policing was all secrets and mysteries.

Jarre pursed his lips. 'Tomas came to our attention recently. He had been a minor figure in the social life of le 188

Quartier Marais. All very liberal. The kind of priest who would ask the Devil nicely to step outside if someone asked him for an exorcism. He had some small political influence, but in essence he was an entirely harmless man. Suddenly he took an active turn. He spoke against the Jews, blaming Jewish brewers for poisoning the young with absinthe and Jewish chemists for peddling opium. He used the social contacts he had made in his years of quiet dinner parties to woo the radicals. In the last month he has been seen with Clemenceau.' Chris must have looked puzzled, despite his attempts at gnomic inscrutability, for Jarre burst into an exasperated rapid-fire summary of Clemenceau's career.

Chris caught about a third of it but gathered that the man was politically important, the ex-leader of the radical opposition to the current government, the editor of the liberal paper *La Justice*.

'Clemenceau has yet to really take sides in the Dreyfus case,' Jarre said. 'His voice could rouse public opinion against the anti-Dreyfusards in the Government. He could press for Esterhazy to be investigated, help reinstate Picquart.

We placed an agent close to him, an advocate who had done some work for the Directory; but with the fragmenting of the Directory and the open hostility of the Ministry of War w e ' v e made no progress. No wonder, if this priest was poisoning his mind against Dreyfus.'

'If he was? D o n ' t you know?'

Jarre flushed. 'Kasper's reports indicated as much, but if Kasper had . . . '

'Been turned?' Chris said sardonically, and bit his lip.

That wasn't very gentlemanly. He was finding being mild-mannered an unprecedented strain; possibly because allies so rarely tried to spit him on their internal organs. Why was it so hard to act normally when it *was* an act? Trying to be the Doctor's fifth self was making him want to blow something up. Possibly the Doctor's sixth self had felt the same.

This chapel would really benefit from nitro thirteen re-decoration.

Chapter 17

The Doctor sipped cautiously at the red wine Dominic had brought from his cellar.

'More?' Dominic asked avuncularly, hovering round with the bottle.

'It's earlier than I thought,' the Doctor said apologetically.

'You should have caught me a little while back when I had a better head for vintages. These days I tend only to drink on special celebrations. But go on telling me about the Family. It really does explain an awful lot. I ' m very grateful.'

'Not so grateful as I am, Doctor. I hope you will never know what it feels like to have lost a child. I cannot tell you how it feels to have one restored from the grave itself. If we can do anything to help you, we will.'

'Just tell me the truth.'

Laboriously, moistening his mouth at times with wine, Dominic sketched out the history of the Family. In 1847 a man had come to Paris seeking something he had lost; a doll's house which had been stolen from him. His name had been Montague, and he had been a toy-maker. In London he had killed people with his dolls; animating them with the power of his mind. Without the doll's house that had focused his natural powers, he had been reduced to a mere charlatan, hypnotizing the poor into imagining cures and pocketing coppers in the rue St-Christien. He had still attracted attention. There was a certain politician who was old enough to take any chance for health, and twice the chances for power. Montague had convinced him to arrange for the doll's 190

house to be stolen back. This part of the story was only guesswork; the Family did not know who had taken the house from Montague in the first place, but they presumed it was a powerful faction in French military intelligence.

Powerful but not wholly trusted by the Third Republic: a relic perhaps of the Bourbonist or Bonapartite regimes that had preceded it. Suffice it to say that Montague got the house back. Together with his political backer, who brought to the bargain a ready made power-structure of Freemasons, political hangers-on and the most bribable members of the Council of Deputies and the Senate, he had begun to use the

house's powers in earnest. He twisted the bodies of his followers: calling it 'freeing their inner selves'. He bound them to him with threats that only his power could ensure the abilities they developed would not rebound upon their children. He grew madder. His political backers grew scared and turned their loose Freemasonry into a shield against him. By 1870

they were organized like a cult, taking orders from one of their number who kept his identity hidden; but who backed up those orders with his one strength: he wasn't Montague.

Montague was too wild and prone to delusions of godhood, to the illusion that everyone was plotting against him. Soon his unreliability had made his fears reality, everyone in the Brotherhood *was* plotting against him. A very few of those Montague had empowered by means of the doll's house valued the chance to have normal children more than their own powers. Two couples risked it. Emil was one of the first children born to them. He seemed normal. Perfect, even.

They decided that Montague had lied, but to be sure they plotted to take the source of his power with them, reasoning that they could always use it to save their children if Montague had told the truth. After all, what could he do that they could not?

"They decided this?' The Doctor's interruption shattered the flow of Dominic's reminiscences.

'Yes.' Dominic faltered, 'but it was not as easy as they had thought. Montague had help in focusing the powers from the House, rituals taught by occultists in the pay of the 191

Brotherhood's Grandmaster. The Family rejected them.'

'What kind of rituals?'

'Ceremonies to whip the emotions of the Brotherhood to a frenzy. Vile displays of blood and lasciviousness. Nothing that we wanted for our children.'

'And you led the Family?'

Dominic paused. 'Above ground, yes. There is another order below.'

'Will you take me to meet the others?'

Dominic bit his lip. 'Yes,' he said reluctantly.

Pierre clamped his hand over Lucifer's mouth and held his own breath. Outside the narrow crack that led to the passage-way they had traversed, things were brushing against the outcroppings of bone; forcing their way past with flabby undulating sounds, with the heavy echoing tread of things no longer human. He waited until most of the sounds had ceased, and then he let Lucifer go.

The Doctor held the chemical lamp high, and heard the thin high hiss of the calcium carbide stuttering into actinic light.

The dank sewer water lapped around his knees. Dominic plodded on stoically ahead, greasy clumps of black sewage clinging to his waders. Out of the dark the soft chittering of rats scrabbling their way out of the water sounded like rain falling.

The Doctor had suggested that Emil remain at the shop in case Chris or Roz made their way there independently. He had drawn Emil a picture of them both with sure strokes of chalk on a toy blackboard, and signed it with a capital D. Roz had been frowning, and the Doctor had tried to turn the expression into a grin, but had decided it spoilt the likeness and given up.

He let the light play over the muscles in the back of Dominic's neck, and tried to make casual conversation.

'So why hasn't the Brotherhood taken the Doll's House back? If y o u ' v e had it openly on display for so long, they can't have lacked opportunity'

Dominic grunted. 'How should I know? T h e y ' v e made attempts now and then. When Emil was young we were always on the move. We shift the House every so often. Not as much as we should, perhaps. It can be dangerous. We were moving it by cart once, all covered up, and a nosy workman twitched the cloth aside to see what we had there. They tell me he put out his own eyes with a table knife. I would have asked Aunt Jessica for permission to have one of the Family's healers try to help him, but h e ' d vanished. It was as if the ground had opened up and swallowed him.'

The Doctor watched for the muscles that twitch when people lie.

They didn't.

'And why stay in Paris at all?' he asked.

'Because that's where we are needed,' Dominic snapped.

'Stop asking stupid questions. It's hard enough remembering the safe routes without your babbling.'

'Oh quite, you can never tread too carefully. Why, I know a country where the surface is broken by continuous ground-quakes, and the natives have to lay stiff mats made from the hides of the Uncommon Green Bear on the boulevard just to take a stroll in safety,' the Doctor said. 'They tell their children that if they don't walk on the bears, the cracks in the pavement will come and get them.'

Up on the fringes of the parliament of bones, where those of the Brotherhood altered for war stood sentry, David Clayton found his attention wandering to the veins of colour in the rock. Below, in the natural amphitheatre of the catacombs, Montague had stopped ranting and his audience was making its way on its thousand different limbs to the higher passage-ways, but David hardly noticed.

He saw clearer now. Things were brighter, even underground. The rock sang with strange harmonies; the eye-searing primary colours of the morning of a new romance.

All his senses were keener, but under it all he felt dimly that one thing that was not brighter. Him. He found it progressively harder to think.

When he held his hands up and watched the light glint from the claws that sheathed themselves in the bones of his three thick fingers, he felt a pang of loss. It was not their appearance, as everything seemed beautiful to him now, nor their strength. It was some other quality they lacked; a quality that he could not even remember. What else was there besides beauty and strength? He was still trying to think when a hundred and eighty pounds of snarling dog fastened its teeth into his throat.

Blind hate surged up in him as the rewired part of his brain fired its simplified neurons. Adrenalin triggered the fight response in his hindbrain. His neck was warm with the gush of his ruptured arteries. They sealed themselves as he pushed his bone spur-hardened thumbs in under the dog's stomach. It yelped and snapped at his face, tearing away part of his jaw.

The beauty of the play of its muscles under the skin made part of him want to weep. Then his claws pierced up under its breastbone, and

sliced across. Its guts thumped out across David's chest, and it howled in agony. Reaching up inside the wound that his claws had made, David continued ripping until the noise ceased. Then he felt an odd listless sadness, and he realized that he had killed it.

The other guards started to come towards him; drawn like sharks to blood. One snatched at the dog with razor-sharp tendrils that twitched around a mouth like a lamprey's. It had three rows of teeth. They all pointed inwards. It too was beautiful.

His back pressed hard against the stone, Pierre felt his way down the slope. The alcoves cut into the wall to form resting places for the bones and mummified tissues of the dead provided him with regular hand-holds. If he could just make it to the woman while Lucifer distracted the guards.

Roz tried to turn her head away from Montague's mad spitting face, towards the source of the cries, but he grabbed her chin and twisted, forcing her to look at him.

'I am the only power, not the Grandmaster, not your 194

Doctor. I and I alone command the power of the dark gods. In **me** it lives and breathes and has its being. There is no messenger save I. They need no other. I am the immortal one.

Bow down before me oh ye crawlers in the mire. I am the Arts magical born in flesh, the puppet master, I am . . . '

He choked and a red froth spilt from his lips.

Fascinated, Roz watched the point of a long knife burst through his chest wall from behind. A mental calculation showed the strength necessary to do that must have been prodigious. A shape moved in the shadows behind Montague's corpse. Roz squinted. 'Chris?'

It was a woman. Roz managed not to look surprised when she realized she recognized her. She was Claudette. The one Tomas had changed. She looked different now. Ravaged, dazed, bloody. A white clay mask covered half her face. Had she just completed Tomas's programming, Roz wondered. It would be ironic if the dead priest had managed to strike down his tormentor in this post-mortem fashion. If Claudette was still open to suggestion she could be Roz's ticket out of here.

'Untie me,' Roz shouted.

The woman shook her head.

The mask fell away.

Dominic pointed to an iron door buried in the side of the sewer. The Doctor smelt the layer of oil that protected the door against rust. A series of water traps and artificial channels diverted the water from the metal.

"This is one of our main doors, Doctor.'

'Well, open it then.'

'Before I do, you must understand one thing. You have been a good friend to my son. I owe you my own life, if you set aside that it was only in danger because of you in the first place. Because of this, I will always be in your debt.'

'But if I threaten the Family in any way you'll kill me?'

'Erm, yes.'

The Doctor patted Dominic on the back. ' I ' m glad w e ' v e had this little chat. Push on.'

Chapter 18

There was the sound of hollow metal underfoot. Every step was a drumbeat. Dominic felt his own heart pound as his heels hammered on the iron staircase. The Doctor followed behind, and either his steps matched Dominic's own so precisely that their sound was masked in that of his, or he was the quietest walker Dominic had ever known. It was annoying. Worse, it was worrying. Dominic hated being beholden to anyone. It only stored up betrayals for the long days of winter.

Johann was on watch duty. Dominic could see his eyes gleaming in the shadowy vaults into which the stairs descended. One of the others was with him; Sister Sante Claire? Alphonse? Dominic could not make out the details at this distance. The figure was just a stick of shadow; loomed over by Johann's bulk. Tall by human standards, short next to Johann. Most probably Claire.

Fifty more steps downwards. The second figure was no one he recognized. A man dressed in rags. A thin young man with a shrouded face. A boy. Dominic stepped up his pace. The Doctor's footsteps still fell soundlessly, so soundlessly that Dominic was starting to doubt he was even there, but he was damned if he was going to turn round to see the man's irritatingly open face beaming at him. Irritatingly open, except for the eyes.

'Johann,' he shouted. 'It's me, D o m i n i c ' Just a courtesy.

Johann could probably count his shirt buttons at that distance.

'Who's the outsider?' Johann's booming voice echoed up out of the pits.

'Never mind that now. Emil's alive! Montague's over-played his hand at last. We can take him.'

The figure by Johann craned its head back to whisper upwards into the shallow hole where Johann's right ear should have been. Dominic saw a smooth bulge of white flesh wrapped around a mouth. No eyes. A tight grey membrane stretched over a brain. One of them was walking; communicating! It was a miracle. Afraid to break the fragile feeling by shouting into the echoes, Dominic waited until he was within proper talking distance to ask the question that was pressing on his heart.

'Whose is the child?'

'Sister Sante Claire's eldest. He felt well enough today to come with me on watch, didn't you Pietro?'

The stick figure buried its head in the cool surface of Johann's scales. Johann rubbed the boy's shoulders reassuringly. 'Pietro's a little shy, I'm afraid. I wasn't expecting to entertain guests.'

Dominic nodded briskly. ' I ' m glad to see you up and about, Pietro. It gives me hope for the others.' He tried to keep the disappointment out of his voice, but the bitterness was still there, like a bad taste in his mouth.

Johann leant past him, holding out his hand. 'And who is your guest, Dominic?' Dominic turned, anticipating the Doctor's discomfort; even the bravest found Johann disturbing. It took long familiarity before it was possible to see the man under the beast. Even now Dominic watched Johann's hands with a mixture of fear and awe. Johann could crack walnuts between his smallest finger and his palm.

But the Doctor shook hands as if he was an archbishop and Johann a minor priest. For a second, a quirk of perspective -

a combination, Dominic thought, of the light shining up from further within, and the fact that the Doctor was several steps up from Johann - made the Doctor look the fiercer of the two. Something inhuman in the shape of the cheek-bones under the skin? It was gone in the blink of an eye.

Johann's fingers curled inward slightly as the Doctor released his hand. 'That's quite a grip you have there for a human.'

'I don't like to lose, even at arm-wrestling.'

Johann laughed, and made a joke of looking at his hand for damage. At least Dominic hoped he was joking. With his claws retracted Johann's huge hand suddenly looked clumsy and arthritic, its joints enlarged and sore. We are getting old, Dominic thought. Impossible to imagine, but true. Not all the powers of the Doll's House have stopped that clock.

'Except for Montague,' the Doctor said, softly, out of the side of his mouth into Dominic's ear.

Dominic flinched.

The woman's face should have been ruined. Its right side was a mass of bruises, and half-healed gashes scarred its white skin. It was still utterly beautiful. Uncannily so. The scars just outlined the artistry of the bone beneath. Planes and contours, cut with the mathematical brilliance of diamond, rounded into the face of a goddess or a Madonna. She was barely recognizable as the vapid daughter of the society hostess that Roz remembered. She was one step beyond the creature that Tomas had made her; another level of beauty entirely.

This close, it was hard to think about the likely causes of the effect. There was a sound like temple bells in the distance, and a scent of jasmine. Roz felt a thrill of desire run through her. She bit the inside of her mouth, and sought relief in the salt intimacy of her own blood.

This fire was not her. She had never felt the least inclination to same-sex affairs. Bernice's cheerful acceptance of freewheeling sexuality had always struck her as the childish-ness of someone raised in an age of historical decadence. As much an irritation in its way as the archaeologist's sense of humour. Never until now had she imagined she could have so, so unnatural an emotion. It was like pain. The woman's face was like a hand clutched round her heart.

Desperately she hunted for her old cynicism; for all the 198

rough-edged armour she had bolted on over the years in the Overcities; for the lessons her family's tutors had drummed in deep and early. The twofold purpose of procreation is the perpetuation of the clan and the forging of political alliances.

Sex is work. Sex is duty. Done for fun, it gets you *involved.*

Get involved and you start caring. Start caring and you get hurt. Even in her rebellion she realized that she had followed the rules.

Crossing the line, sleeping with another adjudicator, was forbidden, yes, but if it was your partner there were standing conventions, levels of known expectation, laws in all but name. And if your partner understood the rules then it was safe. Martle had been safe. Safe in a way that Chris with his puppy eyes would never be. Of course Martle had also been corrupt and murderous, and she had needed to kill him, so perhaps her judgement of what constituted a safe relationship was not good.

Since Martle she had felt desire only in passing. Men from other ages

and other worlds. Maybe just a way of playing safe. Nothing too permanent; nothing too involving. Perhaps that was why she had shied away from the moments of intimacy she had shared with Chris. He was too irrationally optimistic to grasp the necessary degree of cynicism. She had told herself she did not want to hurt him, but really she could not afford to hurt herself. Not any more.

She could not afford this passion.

There had to be more than neotony at work; pheromones perhaps, or subliminal variations in skin tone, or telepathic control of the pleasure centres of the victim's brain. It had to be more than the big-eyed girly look. It had to be more because of the lust that swelled up in Roz's flesh when those eyes blinked in their languid snake-like motion. She clenched her hands under her bonds, trying to break the spell of Claudette's face. Something impalpable was being drawn out of her. An undercurrent of danger, the sense of a streetwise cop gets when something otherwise imperceptible is going down, boiled up in her brain. With an effort she flicked her eyes away from Claudette's, and back to the wounds on the 199

woman's cheek. With a sickening breaking of the beatific vision, Roz realized that Claudette's injuries were not the result of torture, as she had first unconsciously assumed, but were the clumsy self-inflicted damage she associated with psychologically disturbed prisoners. Desire drained from her like pus from a sore.

Perhaps reading the pity that had replaced adoration, Claudette turned away, refixing her mask. Roz considered making a last plea for help, but Claudette was clearly incapable of offering any. A white lady in a broken shroud. A living ghost.

If Roz was going to get out of this she was not going to do it with help from that quarter, nor apparently from Chris.

Wait until she had the chance to debrief him on this. Back-up, what back-up? Roz's cracked laugh, barely more sane than Montague's, echoed out among the bones. She tore at the leather strips, futilely. Where was the Doctor when you needed him? Or Chris? Especially Chris?

In the workshop in Tomas's house, surrounded by exotic blooms, Chris was counting heads and Jarre was weigh-ing them, or at least listing their characteristics. The list was worrying. Top socialites, important politicians, all were notated under Jarre's omniscient eyes. Chris felt

an unworthy sense of relief when he could not identify one: a bust of a man with blank staring eyes.

Could there be different types of beauty? The thought was uncomfortable. It felt bad. A guilty thought. A complex thought. It made his head hurt.

David watched the big-mouthed thing tugging at the yellow animal's skin; stripping it off the red spongy muscles, stuffing it into the whirlpool of its mouth. There was something wrong, if he could only fix on it.

There was no reason to prefer the smaller creature to the lamprey. Both were life. Vibrant amazing life. The big-mouthed thing had to be better. It was bigger and it, after all, was eating the furry animal, not the other way around.

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A dog. That was the name of the furry animal. No, that was the name of the kind of animal it was. Why was it so hard to remember?

He had had a dog once when he was a child. When his hands had been pink and soft. The dog's fur smelt like home; like comfort. He had loved it. Why could he not remember its name? Why could he not remember his own?

Confused, David staggered away from his guard post, Montague's orders breaking down under a wave of incipient memory.

Dominic's face blanched and, seeing his brother's fear, Johann set his claws at the outsider's throat. The man's skin felt clean and slightly slick. The pulse was slow, almost non-existent, like a snake's. Like Johann's own.

Johann's voice rumbled up from the centre of his barrel chest: 'We consider it very bad manners to go tiptoeing through people's minds unawares, if you get my drift.'

'That wasn't telepathy,' the stranger said, 'merely observation.'

'Indeed,' Johann growled. 'I think we'll see what Aunt Jessica thinks about that.'

The Family stronghold was a collection of chambers hewed into the rock. Miscellaneous furniture cluttered the floor, with rugs and

tapestries predominating. Someone had run a line of pipes down through the roof; and gas fittings spluttered and flared in the first few rooms, giving way to reed torches as the party moved further in.

The Doctor noted the chalk markings on the walls.

Directions and messages; temporary and permanent maps of the underworld. He had seen similar arrangements before, in Chislehurst Caves in Kent where thousands of Lon-doners lived underground lives during the Blitz, and in the Megropolis Subterrania on Heiradi.

One part of the familiar graffiti was missing. There were no pictures drawn by children lower down the walls: no sketches of trees and flowers, of London landmarks, nor of Heiradi's 201

nine jewelled moons. The lower walls here were empty rock.

Johann led them down through the chambers. Curious family members glanced at the Doctor as he passed. A gallery of distortions; but no sense of the alien. None of the taint that the Doctor associated with possession or with external dominance of the human will.

Jessica's room was a cramped alcove.

Aunt Jessica was a brain in a jar. Under the mass of cerebral tissue, the Doctor could just make out tiny withered limbs. An impression of a face indented into the matter of the forebrain created the illusion of death. The Doctor was irresistibly reminded of the Turin Shroud.

His second impression was of an icy, ruthless intellect.

Still, there was no reason to believe that just being a brain in a jar was going to make Jessica any different from the other old ladies he had known.

Then her thoughts met his. The average electrical activity of the humanoid brain is barely greater than a fridge light.

Most natural human telepaths put out a signal using hardly a fifth of that energy. By comparison Jessica's mind was operating at the mean energy usage of Birmingham, during the Cup Final commercial break. Luminous needles of thought jabbed at the Doctor's mind; needles that ended in eyes, looking for weaknesses in his psyche. Less painful than a mind-probe; more organic. Probably harder to fool; but easier to block entirely. Ah, decisions.

Deftly he separated part of his brain, mapped the simplest contours of the wider whole into the part, and let a needle slip snake-like through into the placid interior of the separate section.

More subtle than a block.

He was spraining his metaphorical wrists patting himself on the back when three other thought-needles sliced through into the main part of his mind. Aunt Jessica was good, and he was not at his best. Everything smelt of cheddar cheese in his head, and the air tasted of soap and brimstone. He was almost used to it, but it still felt like someone taking a brillo pad to the surface of his cortex.

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He redirected one of the needles to an interminable memory of tedium in England: helping Sergeant Benton whitewash the Nissen huts at the back of UNIT HQ during the slow weeks after Liz Shaw had left. With a nanosecond flash of annoyance he scrabbled for something else harmless.

The annoyance turned into an increasing sense of desperation at how much of his life had been spent in dungeons or awaiting execution, or under easier-to-dodge mechanical mind-probes. When had he become such a meddler? Wasn't there a time when he had simply liked to stroll in a garden and smell the roses? Through a sensation of a billion ants with hobnail boots tap-dancing upside down on the inside of his skull, he realized he did not have enough peaceful memories.

He considered other options. He could read the trace memories implicit in the structure of the telepathic probes themselves and then feed back some of the questioner's own memories with a couple of twists. Good enough in most circumstances but no help when the interrogator was a female brain in a jar. What possible memories could they be expected to have in common? The idea amused him for a fraction of a fraction of a second, and he was reminded of the allegedly brief attention-span of goldfish. A goldfish looks into a mirror. Oh look, he's got the same seaweed and ornamental castle as me. He chided himself for the flash of bad taste. No more games then. He let the needles penetrate.

Aunt Jessica's limbs thrashed in their nutrient liquid.

She broke the contact, gill slits gasping.

'You can trust him.' Her words came rustily, from a larynx hardly

used. Johann pressed his head close to the glass to hear them. 'Show him the children, tell him our history. He will help us.'

'He has already seen one of the children, Aunt,' Dominic said quickly. 'I do not think he needs to see the others.'

The wave of disdain from the tank was almost physical.

'I don't care what you think, Dominic. I am the oldest of our generation. By Family vote I rule here. Above ground your limbs -' the word flashed obscene in the stream of 203

images from the brain, a smeared pulse of twined flesh and shatterable bones '- provide you with the normality needed to represent the Family, but you are not in charge of us. Here you must learn humility. Unless of course you are willing to let me read your reasons from your mind?'

'Very well,' Dominic snarled. 'I will take him to the nurseries.'

204

Chapter 19

'I've the oddest feeling I've seen your Doll's House somewhere before,' the Doctor said, running a hand idly over the chalked directions on the walls.

Dominic tried to bite back his anger. Lock it behind his teeth, as if they were a portcullis. His frustrations were not the fault of this gnat of a traveller. The sound of the hand brushing the walls, like the leg of an insect on the ceiling at night, erasing who knew what vital messages or exchanges of endearments, was like an itch in his blood. Was that what this Doctor was? An irritant that fate flung into the worst situa-tions to force the people round him to react?

The sound ran its nails over his spine once too often.

Whirling, he grabbed the Doctor's flimsy jacket, pressing him against the wall, his face only centimetres from Dominic's own. He did not need to be able to see his own eyes to know that orange fire spattered from them.

'I don't care about your feelings,' he shouted. Flecks of spittle fell on the Doctor's face, only to evaporate before the kindling of Dominic's eyes. For a second, a mist hung in the underground air like breath on a cold day. Then, with an effort, Dominic unlocked the muscles in his hands and let the Doctor drop down the wall. He had been light, like a child.

Just like a child.

Dominic spoke softly: ' I ' m sorry, Doctor. I just want to get this over with. The sooner I can tell Jessica truthfully that you've seen the children, the sooner I can start putting them out of my mind again.'

'It hurts that much?'

'I was the leader of the Family then, not Jessica. It was my decision that Montague was lying to us. My belief that we *could* have normal children; that was what decided the others. It was my fault.'

'Was it?'

'What do you mean?'

'Tell me why I can't have seen the Doll's House before.'

' W h y ? ' Dominic said puzzled. 'Because for the last nineteen years I have guarded it, and before that it was closely guarded by the Brotherhood.'

'But not so closely guarded that the Family could not make off with it, h m m ? '

'Obviously not.'

'You don't find that a trifle convenient?'

Dominic stopped walking. His face was drawn, and red with heat bumps. 'Whatever you are implying, just say it.

Then perhaps we can go about our business.'

'Ilbridge House!'

'What?'

'That's where I saw your Doll's House before. It's Ilbridge House, one of the most haunted houses in England. M. R.

James will write a short story about it.'

'Please try to keep to the subject, Doctor.'

'Oh, I am. Your Doll's House is an exact model of Ilbridge House, and like the real structure a powerful psychic resonator. A structure that duplicates, partially in bricks or stone, the relationship between the psionic nodes in the human brain.'

'So all our powers are the consequence of a fluke of architecture?' Dominic said sarcastically. 'I find that hard to believe.'

The Doctor's gaze travelled over Dominic's face, but Dominic felt that he was not what the Doctor was seeing. His eyes looked oddly focused, as if they were staring at something far away in space or back in time. As Dominic watched, the Doctor stooped and drew figures in the dust on the corridor floor, erasing them with his foot before Dominic could make 206

out more than a scrawl of alien symbols.

The Doctor straightened up. 'Architecture can have a strong effect on

the psyche. Nothing raises monstrous carbuncles on the face of an old friend as quickly as an ill-matched annexe.

Some thoughts become impossible in certain places. My home was like that, and I expect Haussmann had in mind a somewhat similar effect when he "rationalized" Paris; but no, the mere presence of the House itself can't have forced the kind of pro-psionic mutations that the Brotherhood and the Family display. If that was all it took, then the proportionally greater amplifying force of the real Ilbridge House would have distorted evolution across the whole of the south of England.'

'So what else are we to blame?'

The Doctor shrugged. 'I don't admit this very often, because it isn't often true, but I don't have the least idea. It could be almost anything. Anything powerful enough to reweave the basic structures of human life.'

Dominic felt that he ought to laugh at the strange man with his ill-fitting suit and his ill-fitting face, who babbled about impossible things. He could not do it. The attempt would have choked him. It would have been like a rabbit crouching on the railway tracks laughing at an approaching train. He had lived through too much that was impossible to doubt that there were forces in nature outside his ken. His oldest son had never understood that, always trying to pin down the Family, turn them into facts of science, like butterflies on a board. His younger son had never understood anything. His younger son was still in the nursery.

He realized the Doctor was ticking things off on his fingers.

'Not Helix energy; the stars are not right. Not ordinary evolution; telepathy is never selected because it makes breeding too unlikely if you know what's in your mate's head. Great intelligence? No, I'd expect to find a band of obedient human zombies running around Paris paving the way, not two squabbling political groups. Goodness alone knows why it keeps trying to break into this dimension -**1** suppose it's like a trip to the seaside, or a hobby - but even it's bright enough to drum up a better class of fanatical followers.'

'I don't know whether or not to feel insulted by that remark, Doctor.'

'Oh I exclude you, Monsieur Montfalcon. I think you have the makings

of an excellent fanatic. Come on then, I haven't got all day. For all I know my friends are on a slab somewhere while the obsidian knives are being sharpened.'

Roz felt a slackness in the bonds along her left side. A sharp pain lanced into her ribs.

'Goddess,' she swore, and threw herself to the side. The leather about her right arm parted. What the hell was that?

That stuff was tough. She could not believe it had come detached on its own.

She looked at Montague's body. Everything checked out.

Knife sticking out through the chest, one of, still there. Pool of blood, spreading, still well in evidence.

All very convincing, but still too familiar. Every historical drama she'd ever seen had the scene where the protagonist thought the villain was dead, only to be surprised a second later by the corpse pulling a fresh chainsaw out of its vest pocket and going back into the dismember-u-like business.

Roz had a standing plan for that. Shoot the body twice in the head, and then hamstring it. Not having a gun or a knife put a tiny crimp in that scheme, but she'd work on it once she got the rest of her bonds loose.

'Are you all right?'

The whispered question made her whip her head to the right, dragging the ragged tissue of her cheek against the straps. 'Damn, don't do that!'

The blind, kindly face of Pierre Duval loomed out of the darkness.

'Madame Forrester, is that you?'

In Tomas's study they had put aside the heads and were going through the piles of papers and manuscripts, Chris nibbling in frustration at the end of the fountain pen he was using.

Tomas had been an inveterate letter writer, and an almost fanatical contributor to the columns of the radical press.

Name a topic, from the question of revenge against Germany

- Chris was not sure what this was revenge for, h e ' d thought that Germany and France only started hating each other with the two big pre-nuclear conflicts next century - to the refutation of the philosophy of Bayle's *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion,* and Tomas had dabbled in it. Maddeningly, he never seemed to stick with a point long enough to set his views down clearly, and it was hard to see what he accomplished.

Most of the letters were incomprehensible. Even with Jarre filling in the background, it simply was not possible to grasp the political structure of a country from the letter columns of one side of its political spectrum. Again, Chris was driven to wonder how the real Doctor would do it. Get captured and have it all explained to him? Deduce the species, life-cycle, and mythological practices of the perpetrators from an alien footprint in a misty quarry? H e ' d seen the Doctor use both those tactics, but for anyone else the universe did not seem inclined to cooperate.

'What about this?' Jarre said. 'Almost all the most recent set of correspondence is with a Jules Balmarian, one of the supporters of the Dreyfusards, pressing him to change his mind. It's heated stuff. "If you love the spirit of liberty that is the soul of France, etc., etc. You will not rest when you see treason done, blah blah." ' Jarre's tone was vicious, self-mocking.

'Any reason to think it's important?'

Jarre sighed. 'Not much. He's one of the people Tomas had a mannequin of, and he's recent, that's all.'

Action was what Jarre needed, Chris thought. He placed the fountain pen back in the inlaid runnel on Tomas's desk.

'Come on.'

Jarre dropped his pile of papers with a bang. 'To Jules Balmarian's?'

'Yes, I think we have to check everyone in whom Tomas was interested. Look at it this way, what three things do we know for sure?'

"The Government hates us, the Prefect despises us, and 209

something made one of my agents bust a gut trying to kill us,'

Jarre snapped.

'Close on the third one. Try these. Fact one: something got into Kasper, who I presume was a loyal Directory agent, and made him want to kill us. It also gave him weird powers which this was effective against.' Chris indicated the alien gun. 'Fact two: nothing happened to Kasper until we tried to go down to the underground laboratory, from this I infer that: (a) he was set to protect the laboratory rather than to kill us specifically; and (b) it was the owner of the laboratory, to wit Tomas, who possessed the power to do whatever was done to Kasper.'

'So?'

'So, perhaps not really Fact three, but certainly a strong worry is this: if Tomas could turn a Directory agent into a horror from hell, what has he been turning other people into?

And what are they set to do, and when?'

Pierre passed Roz his clasp-knife.

'I was going over the route you described to me,' he whispered, 'when I heard your screams. I didn't know it was you, but I knew someone was in trouble.'

The tearing sound he heard told him that she was stripping off the last of the leather thongs from her limbs.

"That someone is us,' she said. 'There are hundreds of creatures around here. Bad performance-art with teeth. Probably not an on-street licence between them.'

'I know a side tunnel out of the catacombs; that's how I got this close.'

'I don't think that's going to help us.'

' W h y ? '

'Montague's opened his eyes.'

The nursery was a cavern as big as Victoria Station. The Family had draped its walls with children's clothes, hung like talismans or diminutive heraldries against the stone. The air was warm and thick. It carried the odour of cow's milk, a sticky, fatty cloud that seemed to hang in the air. A long line 210

of cribs draped over with black clothes like mosquito nets or

mourning hangings stretched into the distance.

As if to forestall a question, Dominic said, 'Births are fewer now, but there was a time when they were common.

Some of the children have never grown again since they were born.'

The Doctor nodded. His face was taut around his cheek-bones, as if he was grinding his teeth. 'May I see one?'

An old woman was tending a cot about five metres into the cavern. She looked up at the sound of their footsteps on the rock, and the Doctor watched the signals of recognition pass like semaphore across her face and Dominic's. Recognition, and guilt, and a surprising joy. She started to run towards them.

Dominic caught her in his great arms, and embraced her.

'It's all right. It's all right. He's alive.'

'I know,' she sobbed. 'Johann told me. I've been going mad waiting for you to come and explain what happened.

Where were you?'

Dominic turned a rueful eye on the Doctor, who was fiddling with the netting on one of the cribs, as if indifferent to his surroundings. 'I would have come straight to you, but I had to take this outsider to see Aunt Jessica.'

He straighted up. 'Clarissa, this is the Doctor, a friend of Emil's. Doctor, this is Clarissa, my wife.'

On the floor of the shop, Emil twisted in pain as agony crawled its way along his guts. The pain had started gradually, shortly after the Doctor and Dominic had left. Emil had come down into the display area of the shop and had started to clear away the mess and clutter left by his father's tantrum.

The Doctor had tucked Emil and Dominic up in bed, having evidently carried both of them upstairs, although either of them was heavier than any weight the man looked able to carry; but he had not picked up any of the dolls, or brushed up the sawdust and cloth wadding that had snowstormed across the room.

Drawn by a mixture of nostalgia and curiosity, Emil had bent to inspect the Doll's House. He had been shown it when he came of age, in a ceremony that he had found excit-ing and appropriate at the time but which, with his present knowledge of the world outside the Family, he considered a dark and gloomy ritual. Although there had been over fifty guests, almost the full adult complement of the Family, there had been no other children present, and even at the age of twelve he had understood that there was some bitterness or animosity between the other adults - except for Uncle Johann, and Aunt Jessica in her little cart, and his parents.

There was something strange about the Doll's House, although he could not at first decide what it was. It looked in the light of day exactly as it had by candle-light all those years ago. The first onset of the pains had coincided with him deciding that it was the similarity that was wrong. He was bigger now; he wasn't even seeing with his own eyes any more, and yet the Doll's House looked as imposing and massive as it had when he was a boy.

He had no time to think the problem out further, because the pains had started. They were worse than the pains of shape-changing; of bones resetting, of muscles swollen with weird energies. With them memories came; his memories of the Quoth.

The surveyor stared at the great work. It was an abomination.

Just as it had tried to tell the Oldest Inhabitant, five million pattern-lifetimes before, Truthseeker and its supporters had gone mad. They were Blighted without the Blight: Shadowed without Shadow. Where was the art or beauty in this horror?

It was too vast for normal senses to detect, and the surveyor was forced to make its body opaque to certain diffuse energies to feel its shapes dimly on its tactile skin. It was made of hosts upon hosts of Quoth, built into patterns that made bigger patterns, that made patterns greater still. It tormented the surveyor's mind to look on it. Oh, how Truthseeker must have been hurt to have birthed this monstrous idea. This 'War'. This vast circle bigger than some 212

Clusters. This engine which would, Truthseeker claimed, tear the causes of the Blight to shreds.

The causes which he claimed were so close now. The surveyor could barely bring himself to think the Blighted thought. The causes which he claimed were so close because they were in Quoth Space itself.

Trying to break the hold of the pain, Emil hammered his fists against the polished floor. Just to change the tenor of the pain, to make it a thing under his control would be a kind of victory. From the centre of his chest the burning speared out, until his whole body convulsed. A dark stain, perfectly circular in shape, bulged in his chest. A wheel of blackness turned through his body, slicing tissue and skin, yet leaving healed flesh behind it.

'Now, Doctor, you have seen our plight. Will you lead us against the Brotherhood?'

'Willingly, if you accept that I should pick the members of the Family to make the attack.'

Aunt Jessica twitched her tiny arms fretfully. 'As I may hardly fear enlistment, Doctor, I agree.'

'Then I pick Dominic, Emil, Johann, and Clarissa. More would be too unwieldy a force. As it is I ' m afraid I shall have to draft your services, Jessica, to keep us in telepathic contact. We will need every advantage we can muster.'

'I cannot allow my wife to be exposed to danger,' Dominic shouted. 'The idea is ludicrous!'

' I ' m not afraid,' Clarissa said sharply.

'No,' Dominic said, ' j u s t . . . '

'Just old?' Clarissa's anger made Dominic's tantrums look small. 'I earned these years in the Family's service. You should know that. If this ends it, I am prepared to take the risk.'

Dominic shrugged in resignation. 'We'll pick up Emil, and then make our plans. Eh, Doctor?'

'No. I've got the strangest feeling we haven't got much time. As if there's a deeper problem than the Brotherhood, 213

or the time-flux that brought me here. You get the Family together, then strike at the Brotherhood's headquarters. I can't wait any longer for my friends, I'll have to go in alone.

One more thing. Here's what I want Emil to do. His part is vital.'

Chapter 20

From Emil's chest a disc of black fire flew into the Doll's House.

The surveyor watched as the 'War' left the Cluster. It was travelling in the inter-spatial voids now, heading for Quoth Space. It was beyond recall.

Still, those of the Quoth who had rejected Truthseeker's words could heal the wounds it had carved in space.

Diligently they began to recreate from their memories the correct patterns for the ravaged order the 'War' had left in its wake, to put things back as if they had never been destroyed.

The 'War' cut through the outermost edge of Quoth Space.

For a million pattern-lifetimes it cut its way towards the Core. In the first ten thousand of those it destroyed the fragile observation post of a team of Quoth Surveyors. In the second ten thousand it passed through an inhabited region, pulling apart the energy matrices of its population as a side-effect of its proximity. A hundred thousand Quoth, each a potentially immortal individual, died as it passed.

Survivors fled before it towards the Core; taking it for a manifestation of the Blight, a new and dangerous crystalliza-tion of their race's image of all that was wrong and broken, they signalled their alarm in jagged wrenching patterns.

Analysing its motions, the scientists of the Core devised their own weapons in response. Weapons built of Quoth.

At the Hub of the War, Truthseeker sensed the activity of 215

the Core Quoth as their signals were condensed and magni-fied a thousandfold by the resonant patterns of the Quoth turning within the black wheel. A spasm of grief broke through it, but it clung to its determination. Its research had proved one great and irrefutable fact. The further their own Cluster had wandered into the inter-spatial voids, the more cause they had to mourn the loss of their fabled Quoth Space, the less the Blight had affected them. When had it struck first in Truthseeker's own life? Had it not struck when they had come close to that area of space in which, if the Oldest remembered true, their Cluster and its Parent Cluster had once been in conjunction with Quoth Space?

Truthseeker had not known what it expected to find. Other beings? Gods? An enslaved population of its own kind, labouring in the deep heart of the Blight?

It had not expected Quoth going about their art, as those of its Cluster did. Free Quoth, apparently unBlighted. Free Quoth that it had - what was the new term? - that it had made 'War' against. As the War approached the arrayed forces of the Core Quoth, Truthseeker doubted whether it was right. For a thousand pattern-lifetimes it debated with the Quoth that composed the War, all of whom had felt the sickening, jagged deaths of the Core Quoth they had killed.

In the end there was only one thing to do.

Dismantle the War, and turn itself over to the Core Quoth for judgement.

The Quoth are a thoughtful race; in their own terms a slow one. Those of Quoth Space, of the Core Worlds, are more so than most. Patient; rational; savouring facts like the gradual motion of the Clusters around them. Ancient as the distance.

Truthseeker came before them, body convulsing with cilia of guilt and shame. Foolishness was written in its dimension-ripping spines and its partially withdrawn mass. It told them its theories without apology. How it had thought them tools of the Blight, wrapped in its cold core. It knew it deserved its shame.

It knew they would send it and its kin back. That they 216

would be forbidden that which they had sought for so long: the reunification of the Talking Ones. Truthseeker had cost the others in the lost colony all they had dreamt of, all that their patterns had ever attempted to depict.

The Oldest let the decision of its peers creep over its surface.

< You will return to your colony, and take the knowledge of this 'War' with you. You will prepare more, to strike at the Blight in the Shadowed and the Blighted Clusters. You will be our Warleader. >

Warleader shuddered. The verdict was just. It had made war on its kin, should it not be made to lead the war it had meant to make? But it could not let its followers suffer that exile. <I will go, but take the others of my colony into Quoth Space. Let them rejoin their makers' makers. Do not send them back into the outer Clusters. > The Oldest's

words came slowly: <It would be futile to allow them to resettle Quoth Space. It is barren. We have decided to abandon it. We will be coming with you. > By the time that the great exodus of the Quoth had left the vacant spaces of their old Space forever, to journey across the frightful emptiness that stretched between the Doll's House that was Quoth Space, and the Cluster that - unknown to them - called itself Emil Montfalcon, Dominic Montfalcon's hand was already tightening on the doorknob of the toyshop.

The Doctor walked along the boulevard Raspail through the heart of Montparnasse, south of the Seine, less than five miles from the Family's stronghold under avenue de 1'Opera.

Around him the shopkeepers were beginning to set out their goods.

Under their shops, under the Boulevard, under Haussmann's sewers, the dead waited. Far below, hundreds of tunnels excavated by the Romans had been filled with corpses. The catacombs housed millions of skeletons and shrouded remains, moved there by the city's authorities a 217

century before when the overcrowded burial grounds of Paris had threatened plague and disease. The gravedigger's name for Montparnasse was Montrouge: the red hill, the place of blood. Under the hill, according to Dominic, the Brotherhood had carried out the rituals that had given them the precise and fully conscious control over their powers that the Family lacked.

They had found Emil on the floor of the toy-shop, apparently uninjured but unconscious.

His mother cradled his head in her hands and turned to Dominic with joy in her face. 'He has your eyes; just like he always had.'

'You think so?' Dominic said, staring at the painter's unfamiliar face. The Doctor had been sure that Emil's power was returning. His plan, or the part of it that Dominic had been told, hinged on it.

As he watched the flesh began to crawl around the painter's eyes.

Their son looked up at them.

The Masonic lodge stood on the corner of the boulevard and the rue de l'Abbe. The compasses of the order, carved into the corner-stone, were only partly obliterated by time or bigotry.

The Doctor circled it warily, as if it was a sleeping beast rather than a building. Twice students darting between book-shops almost collided with him, only to veer away at the last minute with pupils narrowed to pin-points. He was concentrating on not being seen.

The building was very Masonic. Foursquare. A good, solid, normal house. The fountainhead, if the Family's information was right, of the Brotherhood. The core and centre of their evil.

The Doctor sniffed the air. Nothing. No pressure from out of space, no feeling of absolute inhuman malevolence, no malignancy, virus-like, infecting the stonework. Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear. He didn't like this at all.

Several times he looked at his watch. Over Singapore the 218

moon was full; on the fourth planet of the Rigel system the thousand-year sygyzy was raising methane tides higher than Everest, in Ormskirk an inch of rain had fallen. He needed to wait a little longer.

An hour passed. The Doctor fidgeted with his jacket, read an Act of Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great* which he found in his pocket, devised a five-line solution to Fermat's last theorem using only Boolean algebra, and played a quick game of kick-the-can with some young Apaches. He lost, and suspected sadly that his hearts hadn't been in it. Time hangs heavy when an attack is about to be launched; when everything is already set in motion, and at the still point of the foxhole the newly enlisted men wait for the first echo of the guns. He wondered how they had explained the plan to Emil.

'The Doctor believes, from what he has seen,' Dominic said, not meeting Clarissa's gaze, 'that the power extracts a terrible price from those who use it extravagantly. Since we have the Doll's House, the power that the Brotherhood use now has no source external to themselves. The Doctor is convinced that it should be possible to force them to use their power up.'

'And what do you believe?' Emil said.

'I believe.' Dominic bit his lip. 'I believe that the Doctor knows best.'

The Doctor knocked on the great bronze knocker of the lodge.

'Excuse me, will anybody help the widow's son?' he shouted, wracking his brain for other Masonic passwords and phrases. 'Erm, Twenty-three-skiddoo.'

The man who opened the door shoved a rifle under the Doctor's chin and grabbed his arm, pulling him inside the lodge. The Doctor smiled to himself. This was more like it.

Montague clambered over the supine bodies of his concubines and leered at the sunlight that fell from the gratings in the arch, high above.

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He felt much better now. Well enough to turn his attention back to his two most interesting toys. The negress and the blind man.

One of his more humanoid retainers, oh how he hated the unimaginative, sidled up to him nervously and bent down to whisper.

A man had come banging on the door, demanding to be let in. Like a cow butting its head on the door of the slaughter-house.

Montague disliked surprises not of his own making. He wondered what it would be like to bite off the messenger's ear.

So he did.

The climb back up to the lodge was a long one. Montague liked to think that it reminded him of Lucifer's climb up from Hell in Milton's *Paradise Lost.* This time it only made his chest hurt.

Furious, he stalked along the lodge's corridors. Partly human creatures scuttled out of his sight as he passed.

He had no desire to make it easy on them. His followers owed him everything. Their new lives were his gift. If they birthed themselves into monsters, was that his fault? He thought not.

He had not become a monster. Eventually he would find others who could hold power and not be corrupted by it. A world of Montagues.

He opened the locked room where the new prisoner had been placed to await his coming. The heavy iron door with its multiple locks swung open. The room was empty. A twinge of paranoia tickled Montague's nerves.

He looked high. He looked low. He even looked under the narrow wooden bunk. Since he had killed the Grandmaster, again, he had begun to feel a power moving in the city. A new power; tightly

controlled. A powerful mind wrapped in its own enigmas.

He felt the psychic spoor of that mind here.

* * *

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Below the lodge the bone erupted into flame.

Montague whirled, sensing the psychic screams of his guards dying.

They dared do this? The sheep dared to attack him?

The members of the Family the Doctor had chosen fought their way in from the sewers. Through Jessica's telepathic link they had all the energies of the other Family members to draw on.

Dominic's face was a mask of flesh stretched tight over power. Where he looked members of the Brotherhood flared and burnt. Things withered where he glanced.

Johann used his claws.

Clarissa just walked very carefully, and around her members of the Brotherhood fell back, confused as their actions failed and twisted. An attack on her left two members of the Brotherhood dead and her untouched. Even this tiny use of her power, which the Doctor had stressed she must not exceed, was bringing new wrinkles to her face.

Dominic could not look at her.

Emil waved to them from up ahead. Dominic shuddered.

His son had used his shape-changing abilities to take some frightening forms in the past but this was unbearable.

Clarissa grabbed Dominic's arm.

'You are sure he'll be all right?'

'Yes of course,' Dominic said. Although he was not sure; not sure at all.

Outside the lodge, a horse-drawn hospital van drew up.

Major Henri tugged on the reins to bring the horses to a final stop and stepped down.

It felt good to be back. He had dominated Montague before; he could do it again. *La Fraternité* was not a toy. It was his instrument of policy. His creation. Montague could only warp it, destroy it. He was no builder.

Besides, Henri suspected that the items he had recovered from Mirakle's body on the way here might re-affirm his authority if need be.

221

The golden gun felt at home in his fist. The chair rested in its wooden box in his pocket.

Montague let his mind flow out into the Brotherhood.

This was intolerable.

He felt the surges of power.

Interesting. What was the woman doing?

She was taking hold of space and time, and tugging.

Dimly Montague saw how it might be done.

Roz felt a hand grab her ankle. She twisted and saw the face of the Doctor.

'You're not looking yourself,' she said feebly.

The Doctor blinked. 'Well, actually I ' m...'

Then Montague made everything better.

222

Chapter 21

When the world re-formed, after aeons of nothing and old night, the first thing Roz saw was the wall built out of skeletons. The next thing was the iron ring set into it above her head, to which her hands were fastened by chains. Heavy-duty machine chain. Ah, the joys of industry. The third thing was everyone else; chained in the same way. The wall had been made to surround one of the shelved mausoleums, and she could just make out the heads of her fellow captives over the low tomb. A gap in the bones to her left looked like a missing tooth in a dead baby's smile.

Running right to left, the roll-call of prisoners was: the Doctor, his head still crowned by that wretched battered hat; an old fat man, his face framed by an antique frock collar; a woman who looked about ninety years old; and Pierre Duval.

The blind man worried her. Monsieur Duval had been useful

- he had probably saved her life - but he was too smooth. If h e ' d been a suspect she'd have had him deepscanned before he could say 'Oh no, not the mindprobe'.

'So I think introductions are in order,' the Doctor was saying brightly, rattling his chains by way of punctuation.

'Roz, this is Dominic and Clarissa. I ' m sorry I can't introduce you to their son Emil, but he's still not himself at the moment. They are the "first family" of a group opposed to Montague. Collectively you might call them the yin to Montague's yang. The Family is a disaffected splinter-group of the Brotherhood: very keen on peaceful co-existence with ordinary people like us. Marvellously egalitarian, in an elitist 223

sort of way. Some quite talented telepaths; that sort of thing.'

'I don't know if I would have put it so insultingly,' the old man snapped.

'I've seen quite enough of the Family to have drawn my own conclusions, I assure you,' the Doctor said, his eyes twinkling.

Roz felt a dull ache developing behind her eyes. This was like the household arguments of her childhood. Powerful political groupings picking at each other over the dinner table. Never a word of real explanation. Never a dialogue where the words meant only what the

dictionary said they did. There was some by-play going on between the Doctor and this Dominic. No wonder Montague had triumphed if they had been at each other's throats the whole time.

Montague had triumphed? The memory surged into her skull. The trap neatly sprung, the rescuers confounded.

Everything logical and inevitable, and false. She remembered a different past confrontation underneath the other memories, as if twin streams of consciousness had blended in her head.

The Doctor had finally turned up; by inference the cavalry had been on its way.

Then everything had changed.

Then they were here.

She wondered what the others remembered. The same two memories? Other memories? The ghost scar on her chest itched abominably; this business was too close to her old nightmares. Only one way to get an answer to a question like that. Ask it. Okay, excuse me please, is anyone else here going mad?

She settled for 'Would someone please explain, just how we got here? My head's splitting.' She was quite pleased with that. A nice simple question, and a coded bit of wordplay for the Doctor to pick up on, if he was the only other prisoner to have the two sets of memories.

The result was disappointing: four incoherent accounts that confirmed one thing. Everyone else, even the Doctor, seemed to remember only Montague's version. Roz watched the Doctor's face carefully for any hint that he really had 224

remembered; he might be concealing the fact temporarily for some operational reason. But though she thought he looked as introspective as she had ever seen him, he finally shook his head sadly. She noticed he was speaking slowly, pausing more than usual, like a laser message on relay. As if he was thinking really hard before each word, or as if he was waiting for some internal trigger. He looked old, she thought. It was easy to believe he was over a thousand years old when that bleak emptiness settled behind his eyes.

A diffident cough drew her attention along the row of prisoners.

Clarissa bit her withered lower lip. 'I know what he did.'

'No!' Dominic shouted. 'Be silent, wife. I won't let you kill yourself.'

'Let her speak.' The Doctor's voice was only a quiet suggestion but, impossibly, Dominic subsided. His brow was furrowed with concern or anger. Roz thought he looked like a man pulled two ways. It was a look she had often seen on the faces of criminals who were considering trying to cut a deal.

Shop their mates, or stay loyal through five years in an isolation cubicle. Whether to betray one person or another.

She distrusted his display of feeling, couched as it was in terms of bullying dominance. Had he been more concerned to reassure himself that he was still in charge of something than to protect his wife?

Slowly, Clarissa continued, 'It's a power I have myself.

The power I have. I can see how things went wrong, reach back, change them. Make it all better.'

'It kills her,' Dominic snapped. His eyes sought support from Roz. Why not the Doctor, she thought. Were they already that much at odds? What had Dominic done to turn the Time Lord so against him?

'Look at her,' Dominic pleaded. 'How old do you think she is? Seventy, eighty? She's forty-one years of age, younger than me. Every time she alters things, she breaks down a little inside.'

'Mon dieu,' the Doctor broke in. "The house on the rue Morgue, my two memories.' Roz was lost. What was the 225

Doctor going on about now? Her instinct told her this was part of the quarrel between the two. Something that had happened while she had been in Montague's domain? Or before? Had the Doctor been to Paris earlier than this?

'Yes,' Dominic spat. "That was my doing. I had lost my temper in my workshop. I was younger, less trained in how to hold in my power. I combusted. The power was loose in my body, consuming me. I would have melted like a candle in a furnace if she had not given twenty years of her life to put things right.'

Clarissa tried to interrupt but Dominic's gruff voice drowned her out.

"That wasn't the worst thing. The worst thing was that for ages I did not even know what exactly she had done. It wipes the memory, this

power of hers. Then I began to dream, and gradually I remembered. Do you want to know what sent me over the edge, what cost my wife her youth, what led to me sending . . . ' His voice broke down for a second. 'My sending Emil out alone, and almost caused his death? Do you?' He glared around the tombs defiantly, almost in tears. 'I hit my thumb with a hammer while banging in a nail. That was all it took.'

The Doctor's face was ashen white. Roz did not think she had ever seen him this pained; gripped by so simple and honest an emotion. He looked as if he was going to blurt out a reassurance, but his voice was slow and strange as ever.

'Nor was her action without wider consequences,' he said. "The web of time resists change; but some powers are irresistible. Imagine the time as beads strung on a wire.

Strum the wire and the beads j u m p back and forth. She created such a harmonic in 1884. An area of space-time pushed out of the stream of history and held, for a moment or two, parallel to the onrush of the past. Within the bead the normal restraints on rewriting the past failed to hold. There was no past to exert time-pressure; nor any Blinovitch effect. When the altered bead was eased back into the string of time, the changes wrought in it progressed normally along the time-stream.'

'That was the first of the disturbances you detected in the TARDIS,' Roz said. 'But the power required to do that must be astronomical; I've seen no sign of any technology advanced enough to do that.'

'Nor will you,' said the Doctor. 'Not even my people have the power to turn a past back on itself and rewrite it. Our lives are as linear as those of humans; the line merely moves through rather more dimensions. Attempts to prove otherwise have been uniformly disastrous.'

'Are you saying that my wife can do something that you cannot, Doctor?' Dominic said, torn between fear and pride.

'Using the power that is in her, yes,' the Doctor agreed.

'And Montague used the same power, now, to turn our triumph on its head?'

'Yes.'

'So what is that power?'

'Yes indeed, Doctor. What is my power, in your opinion?'

The voice was a throaty susurration like the murmur of innumerable bees trapped in a jamjar. It was as inquisitive as a small boy's. Montague lounged nonchalantly against one of the tombs, dressed like a gentleman out for an evening's entertainment. An image from an old flat black and white film flashed into Roz's mind: Frankenstein's monster getting ready to sing 'Putting on the Ritz'.

Even so, Roz thought he looked more in control; less mad than he had before. His irrationality was not fixed. Damn, that made it impossible to rely on it. She wondered if it could be affected by the number of his creatures in attendence on him: he had been at his maddest when playing to that ghastly audience under Montrouge.

'Put simply?' the Doctor asked politely. 'To enable you to understand it?' That's right, Roz thought, rile him. Get us all killed. She had to admire the Doctor's methods. Sheer bloody-minded suicidal gall. Spot on, that Gallifreyan.

'When the Universe began, there were many physical dimensions. There were ten to be precise: all at right angles to each other. Within the very first microscopic fraction of time all but the four with which we are familiar, the ones you 227

might call forward and back, left and right, up and down, and forward and backward in time, collapsed into the world of the atom. Folded up too tiny to interact with the normal dimensions with which we are familiar, but just as real, just as able to support life.'

'Life too small to see; which can never contact us,'

Montague sneered. 'This is not the source of my power. You are a humbug, Doctor. You and your pet Negress both.

Mountebanks and charlatans. I felt your presence in Paris like heartburn in my chest, but I see now there was no reason to fear you. You smell no different from the mewling family and their sanctimonious cowardice. I have no doubt that any power in you is that which came from me, from my handiwork.' His gaze lingered over Roz's face. 'Your facto-tum here told me you served the gods who sent my power, but you are nothing.' He sniggered. 'The dark messenger indeed. Heh, heh, heh.' His laugh sounded like the noise an executed prisoner makes at the back of their throat when their

windpipe closes. Death-rattle, Roz thought. He's almost dead.

The Doctor turned watery blue eyes towards Roz. He looked as if he was in pain. Then the shadows gathered about him, and dark lightning played about his head, and his eyes turned inward, and he began to grow. Throwing his head back as if in homage to the moon, he howled. A high inhuman note. His hands clawed at the skin of his face, plucking and peeling it away. Underneath, flesh as black and deep as ebony gleamed with the antithesis of light. He was twelve feet tall when the chains, now stretched tight across his chest, began to burst.

Roz felt her sense of reality backflipping in her head. The bones were real under her hands, but nothing else was. Surely that thing could not be the Doctor. It had to be Montague, turning his power on the Time Lord, forcing him to resemble the mythological being that she had claimed he was.

She twisted her head to look at Montague.

He was running for his life.

* * *

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Montague ran through the tombs, bones scattering underfoot.

He had to get into the light. That thing was a beast of darkness. It would shun the day. Wouldn't it?

Guards parted, scrabbling out of his way as he ran. He tried to order them to close ranks behind him; to protect him from the demon, but the words stuck in his throat. He could only flap his arms wildly and briefly curse their stupidity. Muscles on legs: brains of sinew. Brutes. Heart pounding, he ran on.

Blood frothed from his lips onto the long staircase.

When the sound of bells exploded shockingly into his consciousness, he thought for a moment that his heart had burst. Then he realized that the bells were ringing in the lodge. The sacred peal of four bells, signifying the Tetra-grammaton. The four-part name of God. A Masonic signal that the Grandmaster was in residence.

Impossible. Impossible. Demons were one thing, but he had killed

Tomas. Nailed him! Crucified him. Surely, despite the prisoner's interruption, nothing could have survived that death; a death heavy with history, designed to break spirit and body alike? He did not believe it for a minute.

The sneers of the Grandmaster filled his head, louder than the bells. The demon below could wait; it could only eat the world. This was personal.

Released from her chains after the situation had been explained to her, Roz stretched her arms up to restore the circulation, and slapped the ten-foot demon in the face. Not too hard, of course; its skin looked like it would abrade rock.

'You conniving bastard. You might just as well be the Doctor.' She paused. 'Ever considered a career in law enforcement?'

'I thought he was splendid,' Clarissa said.

'I thought he was stupid to grow bigger than the door,'

Dominic muttered.

Emil grimaced with his razor-sharp teeth. ' I ' m shrinking as fast as I can.' He snapped his mother's chains, and turned to tug at the ones binding his father. Demonic muscles still bulged.

Clarissa glanced out of the doorway. 'Something's coming.'

'Anything we know?' Roz asked sarcastically.

Montague burst into the inner sanctum. The strength needed to throw open the two great iron-studded doors left the muscles in his arms trembling, and his heart felt bisected in his chest, but still he held his head high. He would not bow.

Neither to the Grandmaster, nor to the pains that shot through his body. They would pass. They always passed. Since the power had come to him in 1797, he had proved the philosopher's dictum, except of course for himself. All things passed, save Montague. He choked back a laugh as something tore in his lungs.

The room was dark, panelled with hard wood, just as he remembered it. From behind the partly pulled-back blue and gold curtains, thin

streams of light full of dust motes fell onto the dais and its ceremonial chair. He was not surprised to see the man who occupied it, his face familiarly masked with the bronze featureless mask the Grandmaster adopted, a pure samite robe draped over his slight form.

Let the ending come here then, in this supposedly sacred room, where the so-called Grandmaster had lorded it over the Brotherhood. Usurping the blind obedience that should have been Montague's by right. The blind obedience his dolls had always given him. He opened his mouth to shout for his guards: his internal examiners; his whipping boys; and his moving gallows tree.

The Grandmaster held his finger to his lips. 'Don't say anything yet. If you speak now it will only be a threat or a curse. Not speech. Sit down. There's fresh tea in the pot on the little table. You've been useful to me. I'd like our associa-tion to end amicably. Not with your death.'

Montague hesitated. The man sounded so assured, so confident. More so than Montague remembered. Without his conscious volition a growl built deep in Montague's throat, and his voice when it came sounded hoarse and broken. 'I do not feel this amiability you so suddenly profess. We have not 230

been allies; I have been your prisoner.'

'Protective custody merely,' the man said from behind the mirror of bronze. 'You're too much a creature of habit, Montague. For years you did what you wanted, when you wanted.

Killed anyone who got in your way with your dolls. Drank and drugged yourself into a stupor with your stolen gems and gold.'

Montague looked into the unfathomable bronze mask.

'Morals, Grandmaster?' he said mockingly. 'Let us not delude ourselves in this sanctum. The gratification of the flesh is the end of all our desires. What else is power for?'

The figure on the dais moved clumsily and jarred the table next to it. The tea things clattered. Montague thought he had disturbed its conceit. So much the better. The Grandmaster should bow down before he died. He should lick Montague's feet.

The Grandmaster sighed like someone explaining to a dull-witted child. 'Such behaviour is against your own interest in the long term. It

attracts attention, like it did in London. Do you remember that? The Shadow Directory cutting through the city's underworld like an obsidian knife through an Inca's chest. Burning out the outre, the rum and the esoteric, making it a haven for themselves after the Bourbon restoration in Paris. What did they use to hunt you down, I wonder? Chirurgeons? The Men in Plaid? The Four Kindly Spinsters?'

The creature pushed its way into the holding cell, and Roz hit it with an edge-of-the-hand chop that would have crushed the windpipe of an ordinary man. She followed it up with a left-handed blow to where the nose should have been, designed to drive bone splinters into the brain.

It made a grunting sound and its flesh gave under her hands with the nauseating heaviness of rubber, but the blows seemed to confuse it for a second.

'Get past it quickly,' Emil shouted. 'I'll hold it back.' He dug his claws into the expanded muscles of the guard, tearing at the coarse-grained tissue. His parents slipped past, and Roz 231

saw an expression of wolfish satisfaction flit over the old man's face as he watched his son's struggles. Now she knew that Emil was not the Doctor, but was only linked to him telepathically by someone called Aunt Jessica, it was clear that the antipathy she had sensed was between father and son. Some things did not change between the centuries. She hefted a length of chain, ready to come to Emil's assistance if necessary.

Dominic seized her arm. 'Come on, we have to get out of here.' For a second she met his eyes. Little pits of polished fire, spinning between scorched lids. She let herself be led on, but she did not drop the chain.

Emil's hands burrowed under the thing's skin, feeling for a crucial knot of muscles or for the underlying skeleton.

He hated this, but he could not let the creature raise the alarm. Not with his parents in the Brotherhood's domain.

His fingers, moving through meat like fish through water, touched the spinal cord. He twisted it between his hands.

The thing went into shock, thrashing its body from side to side, almost crushing Emil against the rough stonework of the tomb. Clinging on, simply because letting go was more frightening than holding fast, Emil felt the body collapse under him. The thing's mouth gaped wide and

Emil flinched, expecting its needle teeth to fasten into the side of his head.

Instead it whispered, 'Claudette,' and lay still. A pulse beat in its neck, and Emil considered severing the artery. In the end it was the image of the approval in his father's face that stopped him. With the creature's purple blood dripping from his hands, he set off after his parents.

The figure in the bronze mask stared at Montague. There was sweat on the old toy-maker's brow, and a twitch in the muscles of his upper arm. Only tiny reactions, but significant.

There was real fear there. That was good. Fear was an entirely rational response to the Shadow Directory's assassins. The masked man had felt it himself, a long time ago.

From what he knew of Montague, any sensible reaction 232

was a hopeful sign. A sign that under the layers of madness laid down by years of the gratification of every whim, there was still a hard core of sanity. Fear meant that Montague might be salvageable.

He had to tread carefully though, and the desire to over-elaborate was a strong one. The Men in Plaid, indeed. The Shadow Directory suffered from its own pretentiousness so much that it was almost a duty to poke fun at it.

He took a sip of cold tea.

'These are what I have been protecting you against. I've used your power, yes, but to keep you safe. I've built up a faction of backers in the Government, discredited the remains of the Directory in France. I ' v e taken good care of you. All I ask is that you give up this rebellion against me, heal the artists you have mutated, and live simply until my schemes reach their fruition. Is that too much to ask?'

Montague's head tilted slightly, as if considering, and then he laughed his organ-grinding, creaking laugh. 'Bravo, bravo. A masterpiece. Almost convincing. But I have killed too many of the real Grandmaster to be taken in by an imposter now. Unmask, my entertaining friend, so that I may see your face before I have my acolytes kill you.'

Chapter 22

Monsieur Jules Balmarian, deputy for the fourteenth arrondissement, heard the door to his study swing open and a soft tread fall on the wooden floor. Expecting his personal secretary, he did not look up from the speech about the scandalous independence of the churches which he was preparing, but spoke over his shoulder: 'Just put the correspondence down on the desk, Marceau, and I'll read it later.'

The cold barrel of a revolver pressed against his cheek.

'Give me one good reason why I shouldn't just kill you now,'

the man holding the gun said. Jules felt the barrel vibrate slightly against his face. Either he or the man with the gun was shaking. He glanced down at his hands. It was him.

The man with the revolver was old and greying at the temples, but he looked capable of carrying out his threat.

Bulges in his greatcoat suggested other weapons. A taller, younger man, as over-muscled as a wrestler or a boxer, stood in the doorway. He wore a similar coat, and Jules noticed that he had swept it back from his hips in a pose reminiscent of the hired killers of the Americas. A gun, the handle of which gleamed gold, rested on his right hip.

Jules felt a rivulet of sweat run down his face into his neat goatee beard. 'Place, whatever it is, don't kill me,' he squealed, his voice an octave higher than when he spoke in the Chamber. 'I can p a y '

The second man spoke: 'We aren't interested in your dirty money, Monsieur. Call us old-fashioned but we like to sleep at nights.'

'We like to sleep deeply,' the older man interjected. 'Like the dead we sleep sometimes, we sleep so deep. Isn't that right, Armand?'

'Yes, and we hate to think that anyone might not sleep as well as we do.'

'So we help them.'

'Odd how few of them thank us.'

'How many is it n o w ? '

'Roughly, Monsieur Armand?'

'Roughly, Monsieur Jarre!'

'Roughly, none.'

'Unmask,' Montague demanded. The reassuringly heavy tread of his guards behind him sent a thrill through his body.

Whoever this man was he could be no threat. Whatever the thing in the cellar had been it could not find him here where he had his guards about him. He stifled the cough building in his chest and stared at the imposter. No movement towards the pale bronze mask, no sign of fear. God rot his bones.

Surely he must be impressed by the guards with their steel talons and spines for hair, their monumental strength and utter dedication. A desire to force admiration from this man seized him.

' D o you like them?' There was honest pride in Montague's voice. They were the strongest and the stupidest, the most superstitious and the most loyal of all his creations. He trusted them as a man trusts a mat to remain underfoot. If a demon from Hell appeared in the room, they would throw themselves beneath its claws rather than allow their god to be disturbed by its presence. It would never occur to them to believe that their god could be injured; but a sense of Montague's dignity had been carved into their cells and bones.

'I've seen bigger.' The stranger's voice altered, becoming sardonic, and oddly familiar. The hair began to creep on the back of Montague's neck. It was the voice of the unknown man, the one who had turned into the creature in the cell. The one whose servant had claimed to be a messenger of the dark powers. The Doctor. Fear warred with anger in Montague's 235

glands. The habits of almost two hundred years made one response far more likely. Anger. Red rage seared through his brain. 'I will not be mocked. Kill him.'

'One question first?'

'Wait,' Montague shouted, his voice cracking and buzzing in his ancient larynx. He wanted to hear the man beg. The guards stopped dead in their onrush like frozen tidal waves.

Montague could feel the power flowing out from his body, sustaining them. It was worth it.

'What do you want?'

Crouching in a concealing corner of the catacombs while a band of the Brotherhood filed past, Roz tried to formulate her next move.

She wished Chris was there so she could snap at him, secure in the knowledge that he would understand, knowing that he drew on the same pool of shared experiences.

She shook her head slightly and dug into the task at hand.

Available resources. Herself. A way too cheerful blind man with psychological problems that made him choose to live in a sewer. An old man who could burn things with his eyes. An older woman, apparently his wife, who was the source, at least partly, of the time disturbances; and a metamorph, their son, who had been pretending to be the Doctor, pretending to be an evil creature from Outside. Marvellous. Not a strong enough force to make a dent in Montague's circus of mad psychic artists and disturbed dramatists. What would the Doctor do? What was the Doctor doing?

Ah yes, get captured, berate Montague, escape, turn the tables, snatch victory from the jaws of defeat. Standard operating procedure. The best she could do to assist him would be diversionary tactics. Tie down the Brotherhood's peripheral resources in a series of terrorist-style attacks. Kick ass.

'What do you get out of all this? I mean, yes, dedicated followers, applause of the intelligentsia - once they're sucked into the Brotherhood - sex, torture, intrigue, paranoia. Extra-large 236

portions of *pommes frites.* But look at the cost.*

'The cost?'

'You're dying.'

' N o , ' Montague howled. 'I live. I want to live forever.'

'You're not really living. Life is change. You haven't had an original thought in a hundred years. All this rant, rant, rant is just going through the motions. Besides, the power needed to sustain these creatures is increasing towards the cusp of the catastrophe; without

the Doll's House you can't last much longer.'

'Soon I will have it in my grasp; then I will be supreme.'

'You will never have it. If you are so powerful, why didn't you twist time to give you the Doll's House? To make all the Family drop dead, or always to have been your loyal servants? Distorting the history of the world just to dump five people in a cell! Is that the action of omnipotence, or of a spoilt brat? Be sensible. Surrender quietly, and I'll try to put things back how they were. Carry on like this and there can be only one result.'

'I'll kill you.'

'Two results, then.'

Montague's aged body tottered forward. The preternatural strength that had driven him here from the cells below; the fear that this insect had somehow managed to raise in him, by whatever trickery, was almost spent. A shuddering gasp sent a sharp pain bursting in his right lung. Was he dying? No, it could not be! The world was his toy-shop now, and all the men and women merely dolls. Creatures without feelings or histories, to be bent to the shape of his desires. He would daunt this gnat yet.

'Unmask or die.'

The Doctor sighed, and dropped his mask. You could not win them all. The mask made no sound as it hit the thick piled carpet, but a muffled groan came from behind the draperies that covered the bow window.

'Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain,' the Doctor said softly.

* * *

237

Claudette lay on a pile of bones, weeping. She had been too weak to finish what she had started, and the pulse at the back of her mind, like an internal tide, told her that Montague still lived. At any moment his twisted mind might remember her attack upon him and demand vengeance.

If only the power burning through her had not sickened her with pleasure; stealing her resolve with fingers of perverted desire. She had

always wanted to be idolized, to be loved, to turn the heads of a thousand men at a reception at the Sorbonne. Even now the pleasure was a tiny clenched fist in her stomach.

She should have freed the Negress. Any ally - even one of a lower class and race - would have been preferable to this aching loneliness. At the time though she had not been able to resist draining the woman's strength as she lay bound, feasting on the sexual response she read in her dark eyes. If the longing had only stayed a second more in the woman's eyes, Claudette thought she would have released her. Yes, surely she would have done.

But it had not stayed. Instead it had been replaced by pity.

Bland, tasteless pity. Something in her deeper than the things Montague had done to her revolted at the memory.

Following the quick, imperative movements of Montague's head, the guard wrapped the curtain in its taloned fist and pulled. The curtain fell away, revealing the huddled body of a man stripped to his silk underclothes, his wrists fastened together with red wires, black gaffer tape stuck over his mouth. Behind him, through a sheet of glass set into the internal wall, the Doctor could see down the great stairwell into the shadowy depths under the Masonic lodge. A good fifty-foot drop, even if you could avoid the iron girders supporting the staircase. At the bottom, a sluggish stream of effluent cut through the catacombs, edged in tiles stained the colour of yellow bone.

Montague tottered up to the bound figure. 'Well, well, Doctor. It seems I am in your debt. My greatest enemy, trussed up like a Christmas goose.' He tugged at the black 238

tape, but it proved too strong for his fingers. Frustrated, he glared at the nearer of his two guards. It fumbled clumsily for the end of the tape and ripped it off. Blood and skin came with it, and the man swore through broken lips as the force of the guard's pull wrenched the muscles in his neck.

Montague smiled, and the enamel on his teeth gleamed white. 'Major Henri. Or should I say Tomas, or Jean Mayeur.

It seems that killing you is the nearest thing I have to a bad habit. You should thank the Doctor here that this time it will be relatively quick.' He turned to the Doctor, and managed a crippled bow. 'You inspire me.' He made a gesture that only the shakiness of his hands robbed of ultimate authority. The guard hefted Major Henri over its misshaped

head and turned towards the window.

'Montague, don't do this,' Henri gabbled. 'The Doctor's right. I heard what he said to you. Killing me w o n ' t solve anything. I've already made preparations.'

Montague yawned theatrically. 'I think I liked you better as Tomas. You were certainly more impressive.' He held the thumb of his right hand outwards, and slowly turned it down towards the ground.

The guard grunted. Then it threw Major Henri through the glass.

The Doctor watched the body fall. It bounced twice - no, three times.

'You disapprove?' Montague said winningly. 'I thought I saw you eyeing the potential of the staircase. What was I supposed to do? Charge you like a bull, and go tumbling to my doom while you swished your jacket? I am not so mad that I cannot tell a hawk from a handsaw, Doctor.' He peered down into the gloom and clapped his gnarled hands. 'Look Doctor, your friends from the cells. What can they imagine they can accomplish, I wonder? I will have to arrange a reception for them.'

'These stairs seem to be the main access point to the upper part of the catacombs,' Roz said. 'If we can destroy them, we will cut Montague off from the members of the Brotherhood 239

currently in the tombs.'

'Leaving them free to attack us,' Dominic muttered.

Roz glared at him, and a hail of bullets clattered off the iron stair just above her head.

'Get down,' Pierre shouted, pulling Roz back. She shook off his hands irritably; she needed to see.

The shots had come from a figure hovering in mid-air.

No, not hovering. As Roz watched the figure flickered and seemed to elongate briefly, before stabilizing and letting off another salvo from the rifle it carried. It was a teleporter, flicking itself upwards to counter the pull of gravity. To add insult to injury it was using the rifle she had tried to kill Montague with, or one very like it.

Roz glanced around, seeking cover. The motion of shapes in the

hollows told her that reinforcements of the Brotherhood were closing in on them. The crack of the rifle heralded another bolt. This one missed Clarissa by a whisper.

A scream followed the rifle's crack, so soon that she wondered if someone else had been hit. It was Emil. He was lying on the floor, curled in a foetal position. The clothes in the region of his chest were turning into black fire.

Chapter 23

The Doctor watched the teleporter lay down a barrage of fire on the base of the staircase. Someone was going to get killed in a second or two. Besides, if he had to listen to Montague for another second he was going to lose his temper.

Side-stepping the guards. Goodness, how could things that big be so slow? He swan-dived through the broken glass.

Below, the Brotherhood and the Family didn't stop trying to kill each other to watch him plunge to his death.

'Of course,' he thought as he curved through the air, arms outstretched before him, 'if the teleporter had a squint, or wasn't a good navigator, or changed his mind.' He accelerated by another thirty-two feet per second per second, and wondered if it was too late to do anything about the Universal Gravitational Constant. The tiled edges of the sewer looked particularly hard this time of year. A parody of a poem crept through a corner of his mind: 'I never had a piece of toast, particularly large and wide, that fell upon the sandy floor, but always on the buttered side.'

Then space rent itself apart ahead of him and he smashed into the returning teleporter, knocking the breath from the man's body. The teleporter's rifle went flying. So did the teleporter.

Scrambling in mid-air, his descent arrested by the impact with the psionically induced 'rising flicker' that the teleporter had been using to hover, the Doctor hooked an arm around the teleporter's waist. The weight of his body and the shock broke the 'flicker'. They started to fall again. The floor was forty feet below.

241

The Doctor felt the teleporter start to tense, to get his bearings. He was getting ready to 'jump' out of his grasp.

The changes in the brain that allow a humanoid to break down its body and encode it into a stream of quantum events are many and complex; in particular the thalamus, the pineal gland and the language centres of the brain are generally re-routed into a single hypertrophied organ: a kind of superlocator, reading magnetic fields like the flecks of iron in a homing pigeon's cortex, feeling neutrino-flux like the sand whales of Askelion. The organ is a marvellous aid to

teleportation, letting its owner judge unconsciously the rotational velocity of the planet, the air density at its intended jump-point, the weaknesses in space-time that its power exploits. In the thirty-sixth century, during the age of the Intentional Engineers, its properties had been intensively studied.

The biorhythms of the thalamic core of the locator were open to optic stimulation. Shove a hat over the eyes of a person with such an organ and manipulate it to cast a certain frequency of light and shade across the person's eyes, and their location organ would shut down entirely. Then they would be at your mercy. Thirty-five feet up, tumbling through the foul air, the teleporter suddenly found he barely knew which way was up. Falling like a stone, clinging to a different, panicking stone, the Doctor started work on the second part of his plan.

A churning vortex of negative light. A lens of shattered space and time. It hurt Roz's eyes to look at it. It thrust up pseudo-podia of breaking space like the death spasms of an amoeba.

Emil's face was a rictus of pain and horror.

Clarissa reached out for her son.

' N o ! ' Dominic yelled. 'You'll kill yourself.'

Clarissa turned towards him, tears in her eyes. 'I must, my love.'

Roz brought a rock down hard on Clarissa's head. For once the Doctor's instructions, relayed via Emil, were almost a pleasure. If she'd had to listen to any more of that, she would 242

have needed fine-tuning of the genes controlling insulin production.

Dominic stared at her, and a glint of strange admiration showed for a second in his eyes. 'She's going to be so mad.'

Then he turned back to his son, cradling him in his arms.

'Merde, merde, merde,' Denis yelled as the ground hurled itself up at him. The madman was on his back, flapping his hat in Denis's face. Everything was wrong. He was going to die, and he did not know where anything was. Ever since he had joined the Brotherhood, he had known where he was, where anything else was. His very dreams had been masterpieces of cartography. N o w he was lost. And dead.

Then a soft voice seemed to whisper in his ear. 'Think of a cathedral in a blue box.'

Fear of death shorted out the restraints on his apportation.

The air, the man clinging to him, part of the iron stairs; all vanished in the b o o m of an uncontrolled teleportation. The heavy slap of the closing air smashed into the vacuum left by the vanishing man.

Shards of glass from the broken observation window, drawn by the pressure into the vortex, rained down on the combatants.

Tied in his chair, Jules Balmarian twitched, and a look of new cunning spread over his face. Jarre, going through the papers on his desk for the third time, did not see it; nor did Chris, but it was there for an instant before it was replaced once again by his usual expression of peevish discontent.

He cleared his throat. 'You've evidently failed to find whatever you were looking for. So I suggest that before you make this any worse for yourselves, you untie me.'

The black lens hovered above Emil's chest and then, twirling around itself like a mechanism built out of smoke, it zoomed off into the shadows. One of the Brotherhood screamed; the sound of an animal caught in a trap.

243

Chris leant over the desk and patted him commiseratingly on the shoulder. 'We will be done soon.' He hoped. He was beginning to regret their heavy-handed entrance. Jules showed no sign of turning into anything.

Then Jules was scrabbling for Chris's gun, his hands shockingly untied, his face taut with hatred. Chris seized his wrists. They were incredibly strong. Inhumanly so.

Jarre came back into the room, arms piled high with more papers. He saw that the Doctor and the deputy were struggling for the golden gun. First the Doctor had it, then Jules. A finger - Jarre could not see whose - depressed the trigger.

The gun flared, casting shadows high on the moulded ceiling.

Jarre dropped the papers.

Roz turned to Dominic. 'What can you do with your power?

Could you put a barrier of flames, of heat, round us? Buy us some breathing space?'

Dominic shrugged. 'I could, but it would take all my concentration. Who is to look after Clarissa and Emil?'

'If you don't they'll be dead soon anyway,' Roz snapped.

'It's the Brotherhood out there, not the emergency services.'

Claudette picked up the rifle from where it had fallen. It felt heavy. Powerful. Good.

The War felt the condition of local space, its currents and flows. Somewhere above, in the strange worlds of ' u p ' , the heart of the Blight pulsed like the weight of history. The surveyor set its patterns in the mode of victory. For the Quoth!

This was the war Truthseeker had meant to fight. Fate had brought them to the heart of the Blighted Clusters. Now they would use what they had learnt to destroy them.

Montague peered into the swirling depths. A tremendous spectacle, he was sure, if only he could see more of it. He could always have members of the Brotherhood altered to 244

resemble the protagonists and have them play out the scene again for his amusement.

He was plotting the choreography when a black buzz-saw of light sliced its way through the floor and tried to cut his head off.

Only the sacrifice of his guards saved him. Throwing themselves in its path, they were sliced as finely as the air or the floorboards had been. By then Montague was out of the room, and moving fast.

A figure in white barred his path.

She raised a rifle.

With a groaning like the hounds of Hades, the TARDIS

materialized at Roz's side. Dominic didn't spare it a glance: his whole will was focused on the wall of fire that held the Brotherhood at bay. Almost everyone else was too busy or too shell-shocked by the

continual attacks on their position to give it a second look. Only Pierre seemed fascinated by it, running his hands over its humming surface. Roz realized the hum sounded far too fast and high; and wondered how the TARDIS felt to a blind man.

The Doctor stuck his head out of the door, and winked.

Good, Roz thought; if ever there was a time for a prepared strategic withdrawal to established fall-back positions, this was it. She started to usher her forces towards the TARDIS.

'Just Emil,' the Doctor said. 'We're going to a very dangerous parley.'

'A summit meeting?' Roz guessed.

'Quite the reverse, I fancy'

He pulled Emil into the TARDIS.

<Warleader!) Not even in the last onset of the Blight had Warleader seen such panic writ large across the flanks of his co-workers.

<We have lost all perception of the Outer Clusters. It is as if the Universe was just turned off. >

< Show me, > Warleader demanded.

Quickly the Communications Elite unfolded their structures, 245

letting Warleader quickly perceive the organs he would need to generate in himself to share their observations of the distant Cluster where the Quoth's Wars were active. Warleader reverted to a long string-like form.

They were right. The Quoth's energies had been turned inwards to build the Wars; observations of the distant Clusters had been abandoned, left to the inhabitants of the Wars themselves, but this change was too great to miss.

< Something momentous has happened. The greater orbits of the Clusters have been swept away. Ask all Quoth to adopt this configuration, if they would be so kind. I need more data to understand this. >

Chris held the hot cup of *tisane* to Jules's lips. He glanced at Jarre. 'His pupils are still dilated.'

'He got the full blast of that thing. I ' m surprised he's still got a face,' Jarre said sourly.

Jules groaned. 'Where am I?' Chris motioned at Jarre, who took the hint and kicked away the broken ropes that they had used to tie him up under the desk. Jules seemed different, weaker, more malleable, as if an underlying strength had been erased from his brain.

Jarre looked at Chris. 'Are you thinking what I'm thinking?'

Chapter 24

Claudette pulled the trigger and shot Montague.

He flinched, and in the air the bullet faltered in its path.

It turned into a mist of quicksilver, into a flower with wings, into something that hurt Claudette's eyes to look at it.

In Montague's body, in the real heart of the Blight, the billions of Quoth he had personally enslaved tugged weakly at time and space, and died.

Reality snapped back. The bullet entered his head and blew the back of his old, old skull into a shower of bone and brains.

Leaving the panting horses they had commandeered from Jules's stables, Jarre and Chris ran up the steps of the Palais Bourbon.

The Doctor placed the electrodes on Emil's head, then hesitated.

'You don't have to do this, you know,' he said mildly.

'What?' Emil spluttered. He couldn't understand the Doctor's reluctance. His own fear he understood, but this sudden undercutting of urgency left him trembling for action.

'We could just leave.' The Doctor gestured at the gleaming white controls of the strange mushroom-shaped console.

'The TARDIS, this machine, is a vehicle for travelling in space and time. It can take us anywhere, anywhen. Societies of telepaths, shape-changers, places where people like the Family are the norm.' There was a tiny pause before the 247

Doctor continued: 'Or places where mind-powers are damped naturally by the grey stones in the beds of the sparkling brooks, and the air is red and sweet as old wine.'

'And if we do leave?' Emil looked into the Doctor's cool eyes. ' W h o dies?'

'Anyone you might not care for. Everyone you do care for, as well, except that they would die anyway in time, perhaps in worse ways than a world dissolving into its subatomic elements. I could show you

the historical databanks, the cancers, the blindnesses, the wars to come.'

'Damn you. You're talking about the F a m i l y '

' I ' m talking about a whole world. In a moment I'll be putting you in touch with the real power behind everything that has happened. There's no point in doing that if it's only going to make you another Grandmaster - or worse, a second Montague.' The Doctor's voice was flat and empty. 'I can't make you want to save your enemies as well; but it's all or none.'

'And you think I ' m going to turn this power against the Brotherhood? What about your friends? Would you just leave them?'

The Doctor sighed. 'In one of the wars that's coming, or may be coming, on your little blue-green world, one side will coin a phrase about the difficulty of distinguishing the good enemy nationals - civilians - from the bad ones, like undercover fighters, or guerrillas.' He smiled sadly. 'Always a monkey puzzle, that one.'

Emil waited impatiently.

'Kill them all, and let God sort it out,' the Doctor said.

In Major Henri's outer office in the Palais Bourbon, a newspaperman from *L'Éclair* was badgering Major Henri's private secretary. 'Where is he? He promised me fresh information about the treasonous activities of le chien Picquart. My readers are waiting to lap it u p . '

'He's not been in his office for some time, I ' m afraid,' the balding functionary twittered, pushing ineffectually at the piles of paper on his desk. 'A message may have come in 248

from him before I arrived this morning. If y o u ' d just hang on a minute.' He held a piece of paper between both hands and peered at it. For a second as he passed the yellowing foolscap before his eyes, he seemed shrouded by the pallid light that fell through it.

The newsman grabbed his wrist and lowered the page forcibly. 'Look Monsieur, your precious Major needs me.

I. . . ' The eyes of the bureaucrat met his. They were lit from behind like a cat's in the night. An optical trick, the newsman thought as the green light burnt coldly into his brain. 'What are you?' he stuttered, meaning to ask 'What are you doing?'

but finding his tongue paralysed by the implication of his half question and the probing ache in his head.

'Seeing if you speak the truth,' the creature said. Its eyes, utterly inhuman now, were large as lanterns, all pupil with a dark purple sheen. It pursed its lips.

'Ah.' A thin flexible tongue, grey and mottled as a snake, flicked out of its mouth and wiped the dust from its left eye.

'He *doesn't* need you.'

The pain in the newspaperman's head tightened behind his eyes, and from his ears a trickle of molten wax dribbled down his neck.

Then a black disk of empty space cut through the wall and sliced the civil servant up with a sound like metal tearing.

Jarre kicked at the heavy oak door, and watched the wood split round the hinges with a satisfying crack. The door stood firm however, and Chris moved in smoothly with his shoulder and full weight while Jarre was still regaining his footing. This time the door toppled inwards and Jarre, j u m p -

ing past Chris, darted through it with a speed that gave the lie to his air of seedy dissolution.

Covering the inspector's back, Chris raised the army service revolver Jarre had given him and loosed a couple of shots down the corridor, aiming high to ensure that he did not accidentally hit anyone. The deputies were keeping their aged heads well down. Anarchism of this kind had not invaded the Palais Bourbon since Vaillant's bombing four

years before, and security had become lax. If Jarre was right it would be some time before the gendarmes were on the scene, but Chris knew there was always one gung-ho newcomer in the staidest group. He should know. Up to now it had usually been him.

He backed through the doorway after Jarre, keeping his gun raised at chest level, ready to fire. Holding it in to his body guaranteed him the maximum response arc for the least effort and lessened the possibility of being disarmed, in the event of some over-zealous young politico trying to tackle him.

Jarre already had the drop on the President. The gleaming gun in his

hands was a golden threat.

'Who are you?' the President's high quavering voice broke as he lurched up from behind his desk, hands trembling in the air.

Jarre smiled wolfishly. 'Friends of Dreyfus.' He pulled the trigger.

Chris watched the President belly-flop across his mahogany desk.

Jarre spun the alien weapon on his finger, wincing slightly as the narrow guard nipped at his flesh, and blew unnecessarily across the barrel. The crystal rang like a tiny bell.

Chris was into the swing of this now. It was like a big training exercise. Pin-point the potentially homicidal senators and deputies and ping, ping, down they go. For once everything was going smoothly. So far, Chris thought, slyly reaching in his memory for an appropriate historical idiom, it was every time a coconut.

A yelp from Jarre jarred him back to the crime scene. His crime scene. Jarre was shaking his hand nervously, waggling the Menopteran duelling pistol in a jerky, panicky way.

'Should this be getting hot?' He let loose a howl. 'Merde!'

The gun fell and bounced sideways across the floor.

Chris saw it glow red-hot, as the overload hieroglyphs on the handle unfolded like flowers blooming. He thrust Jarre to one side and kicked the gun hard. Trust the top dog to get the best kennel, he thought, as the gun shattered through the picture window.

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Maths popped up in Cwej's head. Pilots cannot rely on ships' systems for everything. If the psychic forces vented in real energies, they were toast. Stupidly, he flung himself over Jarre anyway; as if the thickness of his body would do anything more than make a more amusing shadow picture when the sun blinked for a second in the gardens in front of the Palais Bourbon's Greek facade.

The surveyor watched the mass of the Blighted Cluster fall behind the War. It longed to assume a pattern of pure joy, but the majority of its body was caught up in the mechanisms of the War, making the tiny changes that its geometries multiplied into the energies needed to destroy the Blight. The structure actually 'whirled' in the four

macrodimensions, turning too gradually to show on the Quoth's most sensitive perceptive organ, but still rapidly enough to disturb the

'gravity' that theoretical science showed governed the movements of the Blighted Clusters.

Elsewhere in the machine, a team of Quoth Reclaimers prepared to make the great leap into the depths of the Blighted Cluster to recover those Quoth who had survived its collision with the War. Once the Quoth had been reclaimed they would be asked to build more Wars. With the inexorable growth of geometry the Quoth would overcome their enemies. Already a dozen Wars had been made in this way.

When the volunteers had been hurled into the smaller portion of the Blighted Cluster - the one which was now on a trajectory that should take it away from the main mass, with its total lack of birthing material - a pattern from the Engineers reached the surveyor's outermost feelers. The Perceptives had sighted a new source of Blighted energy: a more massive one than any of the others this War had yet encountered.

Mayeur-Tomas-Henri-Jules felt a flash of ghostly contacts with the world; shadow impressions almost instantly cut off.

Why had he not become the President, or another highly placed official? Surely there had not been time for the 251

patterns he had placed in their minds, crouching for hours with his life-size voodoo dolls, working Montague's trick backwards, to have decayed?

There was only one hope. His hidy-hole. The one form Montague would never suspect the arrogant Grandmaster of taking.

'Do it!' Emil said angrily.

'Sure?'

'Yes,' Emil hissed. 'Sure enough,' his mind added, somewhere calm and underneath his feelings.

'That's all I can ask of anyone,' the Doctor said, pressing a large scarlet button on the TARDIS console. Emil was sure it had not been there a moment ago. Hadn't he walked right round the console, trailing electronic connections behind him like a train? The Doctor's mysterious space-time link. Not common-or-garden flex. He was still

musing when his mind folded up like a message being squashed into a too small envelope, and posted itself into a boiling blue vortex.

As the blue light engulfed him, he realized that the Doctor had answered his thoughts and not his words.

Something heavy rumbled, 'Why aren't we dead?'

'Speak for yourself,' Jarre cursed, elbowing the time-traveller in the gut, or where he hoped a time-traveller might have a gut. It worked. The Doctor gave a coughing gasp and rolled off Jarre, which was the effect Jarre had wanted. 'What was that all about?'

'I thought the gun was going to explode,' the Doctor said brokenly. ' I ' m , um, denser than you, biologically,' he flus-tered. 'I thought I might stop some of the blast.'

Jarre realized something profoundly worrying. The Doctor really was as dim as he looked. 'Denser, eh? Well, you said it.'

Then over the Doctor's shoulder, out of the picture window, he saw something even more worrying. 'What the hell is that?'

* * *

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Emil fell into the abyss, and age fell on him as he fell. His nails grew and his hair lengthened, a beard bursting out of his face. His body ached to fight back, to regularize the impressions that fell upon him. Only the long discipline of his life let him hold the power in check. One by one his teeth blackened and loosened, falling from wizened gums. What's my lifespan, he wondered. Fourscore and ten? Fivescore? It's illusionary anyway, a product of the mind's time-sense being accelerated. Biologically I'd be dead from loss of water in three days, food in forty.

After the aging, when he felt like a skeleton hanging in space, it was the turn of his life to flash before his eyes. That was okay. H e ' d forgotten most of it. Being a baby was the worst. Everything was either comfort or not-comfort. Luckily that bit seemed speeded up. After he had lived his whole life to the point where he said 'yes' to the Doctor twice, he stopped paying attention and thought about the physics of his position for a while.

I ' m not me. I ' m a copy of me put in the Doctor's machine and run at

its highest speed. I just think like me, and I have to think like me because I ' m the only one with a suitable mind to have touched the Doll's House without wishing, to have felt the Quoth not as a tyrant but as an interpreter, an echo chamber. It's the emptiest vessels that make the best echoes, he thought wryly. He remembered it all now. It all seemed clearer. He was thinking like he used to think when he had used the power to boost his intellect. Except it wasn't the power, was it? Something about thinking with the mechanisms of the Doctor's machine rather than with flesh was doing this to him. His thoughts were not only quicker, but also more accurate. Were his thoughts being subject to some checking process beyond his ken, like the logical gearing proposed by Babbage for his analytical engines?

Interesting concept.

In the TARDIS console room, the Doctor thought of slow, robotic, planet-sized mechanisms moving through inhabited solar systems and laying them waste. He bit his lip. A tiny 253

bubble of blood showed red between his teeth.

Emil's body lay on the floor, tenantless, next to the morose teleporter who was trussed up with a red-handled skipping rope, unable to move or even teleport away.

The Doctor had only the second-hand impression of the Quoth he had gleaned via Jessica's link with Emil to go on. If they reacted badly to the existence of beings a billion billion times their size, he might need a fall-back plan. A bad joke occurred to him: why is a Time Lord like someone with a Viking ancestor? They've both got Berserkers in their blood.

The nanobots in his bloodstream, part of his Time Lord heritage, could cure Emil of the Quoth if need be. Cure everyone. The only cost would be the death of things too small to see. As it always was, if you just stood in the right place. He seized Emil's hand. His pulse was steady. Good.

What would be better, the end of Earth - and the collapse of the established timeline - or the genocide of a race of aliens who had never meant any harm and who had already been ruthlessly, albeit unknowingly, enslaved for millions of subjective years? He pulled a coin out of his pocket and scowled when he saw it had two heads. He tossed it anyway. In a local universe like a TARDIS, sometimes prevailing patterns of probability could be determined by stochastic

analysis. The coin landed on its side on the TARDIS console.

The Doctor beamed. 'Just as I thought.' He licked his lips and re-metabolized the nanobots.

Chris looked, and felt his jaw drop. Outside, the duelling pistol spun in the air, a slow-turning golden space-station orbiting around a black spiral galaxy. Streams of red energy twirled off the gun into the dark hole in space, which was visibly enlarging.

'So, Doctor,' Jarre said, 'is this part of the plan?'

'Look,' Chris sighed, 'I think there's something I'd better tell you.'

[So] <Wait, which of you patterned that?> [Obvious] <Did you receive that also? > [Now.]

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< Yes, Warleader. >

<It is something other than ourselves. After all the ages! > There was new-born wonder in Warleader's voice.

So obvious now, Emil thought. His father had been working with the Grandmaster, keeping Montague distracted. The Family a buffer zone; a distracting move on a chessboard; a bright shiny trinket for a vulture's eye. How many had suffered because of it? The artists sacrificed to Montague, the Family members picked off in ambushes over the years, the babies twitching in their padded cradles. The passers-by, the people on the express in Lille killed as part of a trap for him.

He had never even noticed that when he had been stupid. His mind was clear as ice now. A ghost in the machine. Who had, who would say that? He felt the circuitry would tell him, if he just knew how to approach it.

He tried not to be distracted; to remember feelings. Was that why the Doctor worked so hard to annoy him? Perhaps, but Emil still found him too hard to understand.

What he did understand was that he could always have this mind. He saw now how to recreate this clarity in his own head.

Proteins like strings of precious stones; hyperganglions. The Family

could be remade perfect. The wrongdoers punished. His father forced to confess, and then magnanimously forgiven.

God's in his Heaven, all's right with the world. And the future?

The people unborn, unconceived? What were they to him?

What was he to himself? When he had power, he had hated it and wanted only to be himself. Now he knew, he never knew who he was.

<Who are you? What are you?> The voice was not his own. Nor was it really a voice.

Now the real dialogue could begin.

If only he could remember what he was supposed to say.

Chapter 25

Sweat boiled from Dominic's skin. Behind him, against the stones, Clarissa, Duval and Roz were stockpiling the sharpest shards of rock; getting ready to fight when Dominic's anger failed. Madness. Sticks against the lightning. Clarissa's eyes were red from tears. She was worried about Emil. She should be worried about herself. Dominic knew she was going to die soon. They all were.

When Dominic's strength failed the barrier would collapse and wash over them with its fires, or the things that flung themselves at it like moths at a flame would break through it.

Dominic's arms shook as he tried to fix the patterns of the fire in his mind. He stared through the distortion of the broil-ing air, watching the figures move back and forth on the other side of the barrier. What did they want? Vengeance?

The mere pleasure of rending flesh beneath their talons? He wished he knew. It might help him hate them. He wanted to want to kill them. He wanted to feel the certainty of anger, but the emotion simply was not there. Holding the barrier without it was like holding ice. Its flame melted through his fingers. Its solidity was an illusion. A couple of the creatures seemed to sense that. They drew close to the weak spots; the blue cold spots in his yellow and red vision.

A man with the head of a lion flung himself against the barrier and sizzled into scarlet gouts of flame, squealing like a pig with its throat cut. Feedback burst into Dominic's mind as the temperature of the air faltered, and other parts of the barrier cooled as the charred corpse of the leonine man was 256

flung back into the midst of Montague's puppets. It was so hard to keep it all in motion. The dance of molecules sickened him. A deterministic waltz, interrupted by the perpetual motion of his will. Just to stop might be fatal now.

It would be so easy to lie down and sleep. Just to let go and let the mindless things that Montague had bred swarm over them. A momentary pain, no more, and then oblivion. No need to see Clarissa die; no need to live and have the Family condemn him for his betrayal. Well, why not, Dominic thought. To die is as meaningless as to live. He edged towards the wall of flame. It did not feel hot to him, but a strange cold. Can a Flamer burn himself? he wondered.

Roz's hand came down hard on his shoulder. She had ripped part of the fabric of her dress and made a contrap-tion of long strips of cloth. Dominic recognized it as an improvised sling. 'Can you lower the temperature in one part of the barrier?' she asked.

Dominic's voice was shaky. 'Only for a little while. I can barely hold it as it is. Besides, what good is that thing?

They'll just heal.'

'Will they?' Roz gestured at the corpse of the leonine thing; a dark huddled shape barely visible through the barrier.

'He didn't. I think something's happened to Montague, and without him their psychic powers are dying. With luck their metabolisms rely on the power; hardly any of them look biologically sound. If we can hold them off long enough they'll probably just drop dead.'

'You don't really believe that.'

Roz looked at him with stone-dead certainty in her eyes.

'Oh, but I do, Monsieur, considering the alternatives. More, I think they know it too, at least at some level of their consciousness. That's why they are so keen to get in to us. To get this.' She took a transparent cube from her pocket. Inside it, through a thick green liquid, Dominic could just see the distorted shape of a tiny chair.

'Where did you get that?'

"The Doctor slipped it to me when he took off with Emil.'

Dominic swore weakly. 'You see what this means. We've 257

been sacrificed to keep these things in one place while the Doctor escapes.'

'No.'

'You don't believe h e ' d do it, do you? Take it from me, a man will sacrifice anything to save his skin. Anything.'

<What are you? Are you a god - if any gods there be?> No. I am a man.

< And what is a man? >

A living being built of cells, built of molecules, built of atoms, built of quarks.

< Where are you? >

All around you. You are strings of quarks smeared down into the micro-dimensions, living within the atoms of my body.

< You are our Cluster? >

Yes, I suppose so.

< But not a god? >

No.

< Just a creature so vast that we have barely explored a part of you? >

Er, yes.

< So all the Clusters are things like you? > Yes.

< Why do you torment us? >

We don't. At least, we don't intentionally. At least, not all of us did intentionally. We did not know you were alive. We did not know of you; only of a power that could be made to shape the world around us.

< What have you done to all the other Clusters? > I ' m isolated so that I can talk to you.

< What do you want to say? >

I want to help you to be free, and I want to say I ' m sorry.

Dominic felt the barrier waver, and through one of the cold spots an eyeless, moist head forced its way. Razor teeth fixed in a shark mouth. Shoulders like tree trunks, arms like boa constrictors. There were two others with it. Dominic got a 258

confused impression of a tree made out of crystal and a man with a long engorged fleshy organ growing from his abdomen, that opened at its end into a tiny insane replica of a human face.

A scream of shattering crystal jarred the teeth in his head.

The first creature was fighting the other two. It was trying to force them into the hotter parts of the barrier. It had broken a shining glass limb from the tree creature and speared it through the abnormal limb of the man-thing. Yellow diseased fluid evaporated where it hit the barrier. The eyes of the little head burst in red balls of froth. Then it burnt away like a wax death-mask on a red-hot statue.

Roz shouted a name, but it was lost in the surge of the fire as Dominic strained to cleave a pathway for the creature.

From the other side, distorted by the heat, a wail arose. A sound like cats being tortured. A groaning, wheezing sound.

Surely even the throats of the altered could not make that sound.

Roz shouted, 'Yes!'

In the midst of the bonefields, the TARDIS materialized like a foursquare blue mausoleum.

'Whatever that thing was, it's alien,' Jarre shouted, 'and you pick now to tell me you're not this marvellous sage from the future who always puts things right!' He grabbed Chris by the collar of his gendarme's uniform. 'What is that then, Monsieur Whoever-You-Are?'

'It's some sort of vortex feeding on psychic energies,'

Chris gabbled, fear granting him certainty. 'Just be glad we got to the politicians first or it would be pulling that power out of their heads, probably fatally.'

Screams sounded down the corridor. A doppler sequence of sound, getting nearer.

Chris grabbed Jarre and threw him to one side.

A dozen or so more black galaxies smashed into the room and out through the wall.

The Doctor and Emil stood in the doorway of the TARDIS.

The creatures shuffled nearer to it, drawn by the light from the interior and the power they sensed in Emil.

Across the hall of bones, the Doctor stared into Roz's eyes.

His voice seemed to shake the tombs. 'Open the box!'

Roz ran her index finger along the upper edge. The lid turned black and winked out of existence. The green liquid started to flow upwards out of the box, leaving the chair exposed. She almost dropped it. A room-temperature superfluid? Some psychic-deadening alien gloop the Doctor carried in his pocket for just those occasions when malicious furniture needed restraining?

She was momentarily relieved when the thick green soup merged into the upper outer surfaces of the cube as a micro-scopically thicker layer of transparency. She had not wanted any of that on her hands.

The relief lasted less than a second. Roz's next thought was that the universe had fallen on her. From the bodies of the altered, from the fading barrier, from the stones themselves and from the air, power surged into the chair. Forcing her back like a stream from a watercannon. A stream built out of blue-grey Cherenkov radiation as psychic energies were driven into the fabric of the tiny chair.

From Emil outwards, the wave of Quoth warrior-mission-aries swarmed through the Blighted Clusters that were the inhabited brains of Montague's creatures. In comparison to that war the Rutan-Sontaran conflict was a squabble in a play-pen. It took almost a full minute.

A man with a body eight inches across and limbs like a spider, whose metabolism had worked by teleporting oxygen into his bloodstream and teleporting fatigue poisons out, started to choke as atrophied lungs with too small a surface area failed.

A woman whose body stretched through several chambers of the catacombs went into spasm as nerve signals once carried telepathically at lightspeed were forced back to the slow routes of synapses and neurons.

A thing neither male nor female screamed in a high treble 260

as ugliness and sin fell back on the pristine contours of its unearthly loveliness.

Dominic, the power to maintain the barrier stripped from him, bent down and ran his hand across his wife's face.

Compared to everyone else it seemed so normal.

The creature that had striven to make its way across the barrier to them crouched on the ground, doubled over in agony. When it moved, its overpowered muscles splintered the bones to which they were attached, bones that were no longer sheathed with psychic force. It was moaning the name

'Claudette' as if it helped it to make a sound. Dominic could hear the surfaces of its bones grinding together under its skin.

From the tunnels a woman in a white shroud tottered over to it; her impossibly long calf muscles making her stumble.

Through the injured and the dying the Doctor passed, leading Emil by the hand. Heading for Roz.

The blind man drew a knife from his inside pocket with his right hand.

He held it to the side of Roz's neck. His other hand grabbed the base of the cube.

'I'll take that. It will be even more useful now so much power has flowed into it.'

The Doctor's face turned hard. For a horrifying instant he thought it was a Chirurgeon, one of the augmented assassins of the Shadow Directory. It was a hundred years since the Doctor had last met one of those - if you could count being face-down with a knife in your neck as a meeting. Against one of them Roz wouldn't stand a chance.

'Stand down, authority Raphael, Chirurgeon, Baby-Pierre-Baby-Tao,' the Doctor snapped, hoping the codes from the time of the Woodwicke Calamity had not become defunct.

Pierre grinned. 'I have the feeling y o u ' v e mistaken me for someone else, Doctor. Not that I shouldn't be used to that by this time.'

The Doctor returned his grin. 'You can't imagine how relieved I am to hear you say that.' His eyes flicked over 261

Pierre's body. Now that a couple of seconds had passed the shifts in body language were becoming unmistakable.

'Grandmaster.'

' "Grandmaster" will do fine. Come, let us reason together.

Something seems to be preventing my accessing my more valuable conquests, but this bolthole of a mind, this humble last resort, appears to have been missed. I wonder if you can explain that, Doctor?'

The Doctor rubbed at his ear; adjudication sign language -

prepare to engage. 'As I once remarked to my old teacher Borusa, it is a cardinal error to imagine that I am responsible for everything that goes wrong.'

'Spare me your childhood reminiscences, Doctor.' The knife drew a line along Roz's neck. Then two things happened. Clarissa sank her teeth into the Grandmaster's ankle, and Roz threw her head back. It hit the rock wall hard, almost stunning her, but it moved her main artery away from the line of the knife. The Grandmaster brought his boot heel down on Clarissa's face, and deflected Roz's wild blow - a left-handed jab - with his right elbow, spinning the knife in his right hand as he did so. He was good; probably drawing energy from the proximity of the chair and translating it into reaction speed.

The knife gleamed golden in his hand. Blisters raised themselves on his palm. The Doctor saw Dominic's eyes blaze. His power was now only a candle to the torrent of flame that the presence of the Quoth had banked up in him, but he could still burn. The Grandmaster threw the knife with a flick of the wrist from his ruined right hand. Dominic screamed as the molten metal splashed across his face. The Grandmaster flexed his left hand. Another knife popped into view. Five steps too far away, the Doctor said a rude word in ancient Betelgeusian. Mass from nowhere. In and around the chair, Quoth that he had promised to help were being tormented into restructuring space and time. The Grandmaster was picking up Montague's tricks. Any more of that and nineteenth-century Paris would be history.

Four steps. Roz had dropped the cube, and had the 262

Grandmaster's left hand clasped firmly in both of hers. She had the leverage but he was winning.

Three steps. Then the Doctor let the Grandmaster share a Time Lord gift. Augmented by the TARDIS telepathic circuits, still set to maximum, the incomprehensible pattern language of the Quoth - the sounds of colours, and the shapes of space, the smell of old coach stations and the feel of velvet and oil paints on the tongue - flooded into the Grandmaster's mind. The Doctor had had time to get used to it; he had not. 'Omnibus, artichoke, heliotrope,' he hissed.

'Beware the burning giraffes of Pimlico.' A noise like a broken clock came from his throat.

Two steps. The Doctor saw that the Grandmaster must have prepared his victims by more than the application of the Quoth power. Deep hypnosis, involute programming, the whole bag of Mesmer's tricks. Half his moves seemed to be hardwired into his cerebellum; against an ordinary adversary he did not need his conscious mind. The Doctor imagined a set of images moving through a surgically isolated part of the man's brain. The target was an old black woman; a basic baritsu throw keyed into his muscles. Grab, twist, break her back. Then the man.

One step. Roz chopped him in the throat. He fell, choking.

She kicked him in the side of the head as he fell. The Doctor caught him, and jabbed two fingers into the ganglion at the base of his skull. The Grandmaster's limbs twitched randomly. The Doctor raised his hat and mopped his brow with his paisley handkerchief, before absent-mindedly putting it back in a different pocket. He looked at Roz. 'Well done.'

'No suggestions that tea and biscuits would have calmed him down?'

'Not this time.'

'I should think not.'

The Doctor affected a look of puzzlement. ' H m m ? '

'Look at us, Doctor. It's a bloody battlefield.'

'Ah, but I ' m going to wheel in the oldest and most successful of happy endings. The God from the Machine.' The Doctor took the cube. His face dropped. 'The chair's broken.

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It must have happened when the Grandmaster grabbed for it. The Quoth were still in conflict; unable to maintain its molecular structure.'

' S o ? '

'It was part of the pattern of Ilbridge House; part of the psionic resonator. With it intact I could have asked the Quoth to put

everything back as it was. To heal the people they had infested. They could have done it easily with the chair's resonance to artificially support them while they laboured.'

'Will anything else do the j o b ? '

'Only a fresh source of psionic e n e r g y '

'Emil?'

'Wrung dry.'

'The Family?'

'Too far away, even via the link.'

Roz was sounding desperate. 'You?'

The Doctor shook his head. 'Impossible. I have too many defences. The Quoth would be too busy fighting them to act quickly enough.'

'There's only one solution then, isn't there?'

'As you said, it's a battlefield.'

'What do I d o ? '

By four o'clock in the morning, the uniformed gendarmes had set up barricades around the gardens of the Palais Bourbon and were directing the trickle of traffic away from them, with the stoic disinterest of men who felt that by rights they ought to still be asleep. A smudged cloud of smoke hung against the backdrop of the sky, and jet-black crystals fell like snowflakes along the left bank of the Seine.

The Doctor had found a white wrought-iron table, knocked into a flower bed. Back-tracking the devastation, Roz saw a table-shaped hole punched through one of the long windows of the Palais. Just a part of the cartoon destruction. The glass was not even cracked around the shape. The Doctor set the table upright, and talked one of the gendarmes into fetching four chairs. Roz did not catch what he said; her head was still throbbing too badly. From behind her red and

burning eyes she watched the Doctor take a lace handkerchief from his jacket's breast pocket, and started unfolding. By the time the gendarme came back he had a whole table-cloth, embroidered with flat white historical soldiers. Roz ran her hand over one of them who

was looking skywards, an arrow sticking out of his eye. He looked how she felt.

Chris was with the man who was in charge of the gendarmes, a lumpy man with sallow skin. He did not wear a uniform, only a long shapeless coat that looked heavy. It bulged noticeably at his left shoulder. Roz thought he probably had a bulky projectile weapon stuffed in there. Maybe another at his right hip. Chris waved when he saw Roz and the Doctor at the table, and turned to speak to the man in charge, who shrugged and nodded his head towards their table. Giving permission. H e ' d got Chris house-trained.

Roz clocked his eye movements. Low blink-rate, scary.

Cop eyes.

When the Doctor's tame gendarme arrived with the croissants and jam, the sallow man just looked at him until he pulled a chair out for him. Chris did not sit down until the cop had.

The croissants tasted of fat and salt. Roz would not have cared if they had been crawling across the plate. She was ravenous.

The man introduced himself as Inspector Anton Jarre of the Surete Generate. Chris handled the introductions for the Doctor and Roz. Roz had her mouth full. Food seemed to help.

Jarre stared at the Doctor intently.

The Doctor fished for a corner of the table-cloth.

'Oh dear, do I have a spot of soot on my nose?'

'No Doctor, you look fine. I am merely pleased to finally meet you properly.'

Roz caught Jarre's amused sideways glance at Chris as the inspector shook the Doctor's hand. Chris looked embarrassed. What had he been up to?

'Perhaps you can explain what we have to thank for all this . . . ' Jarre searched for a phrase ' . . . irrational anarchy?'

Roz recognized the bitter ironic tone of a professional. Perhaps Chris had even learnt something from this man.

The Doctor toyed with his croissant, which had gone hard and cold on his plate. 'A historical injustice: righted with as little damage as could be managed. Trust me, it could have been much, much worse.'

Jarre let his eyes roam the gardens ironically. 'Indeed!'

The gardens of the Palais Bourbon were a wreck. The black spirals had sliced perfect segments out of the Greek columns that lined the walks, had punched ornamental hedges through with exact circles, had decapitated statues and left fountains whose sprays spilled out as lop-sided, pathetic dribblings.

'It does need work,' the Doctor admitted. 'Could suit DIY

enthusiast or amateur landscape gardener.' He stood up and grasped the end of the table-cloth. Oh no, this was going to be worse than his spoon-playing. Roz could see what was coming. She appropriated the Doctor's croissant before he could send it flying.

'Now, this trick needs the full cooperation of everyone,'

the Doctor said. 'I must ask for complete silence. Watch closely'

He pulled the table-cloth away in one smooth movement.

Plates fell to the grass, and a cup shattered against the iron leg of the white table. 'Voilà!' the Doctor shouted.

Chris, and Jarre stared uncomprehendingly at his breakfast things. The Doctor made look-behind-you motions with his eyes. They turned back to the gardens. Roz was already emitting a low whistle of disbelief, around a mouthful of croissant.

The statues were intact, the gravel freshly raked out of its whirlpool disturbances, the plants healed and complete again.

'My little friends, the Quoth, have absolutely eidetic memories. It didn't take them long to put everything back how they found it.'

'Everything?' Jarre repeated.

'Almost. The human element is harder, I ' m afraid. The 266

politicians that Mayeur forced the Quoth to overlay with his own personality are in a nice mess. The Quoth could rebuild them as they found them, but they'd be younger and missing some memories. All the recent embarrassing ones. And the Brotherhood are all past help, I

fear.'

Chris felt Roz's hand come down on his shoulder. He glanced up and saw her make a come-with-me movement with her head. He felt an old nervousness in his spine, and got up and followed her.

They stopped by a fountain.

Roz spoke first: 'Where were you?'

'What?'

'When I needed back-up, where were you?'

'I, er, when, exactly?' Chris hedged.

'Did you get my message at all?'

'No.'

Roz s i g h e d 'Just try and be more alert next time I ' m going to die.'

Then she kissed him.

'As it is,' the Doctor finished, ' I ' m afraid that they will start rationalizing their memories fairly quickly. A politician who wakes up to find he has, inadvertently and entirely without meaning to, framed a member of an unpopular minority is very unlikely to admit it.'

Jarre sighed. 'I understand about half of that, and that half I don't like. You're telling me that the battle to free Dreyfus and clear the Shadow Directory is not over.'

'Yes. I am, rather. There will always be such battles as long as there is human stupidity, I ' m afraid.'

'And will we triumph, Monsieur time-traveller?'

'As long as there is human ingenuity and bravery, triumph is always possible. Do you really want a fuller answer than that?'

'No, I suppose not. The Directory's experiences with precogs have shown us that the future is a steel trap. We will be careful how we plant our feet from now onwards.'

The Doctor fidgeted.

'What are you going to report about me?' he asked, looking Jarre straight in the eyes.

'To the Prefecture and Military Intelligence? Nothing.'

'To the Gentlemen of the Directory in London. To the Chirurgeon Générale. To the Scarlet Letterbox. To whatever baroque monstrosity Duquesne was so afraid of.'

Jarre tried not to react. The Doctor was fishing, looking for more information about the remains of the Directory. How much did he know already? For that matter, in all conscience, how much should it know about him? The purposes of the Directory had been diluted over the years, but even so the Gentlemen's instructions were clear. All irrational incidents to be reported in triplicate. The ending of the unearthly, and the outre. 'What do you suggest?' he asked.

'There's an epigram by John Owen. One of the minor poets, but a decent epigrammatist. "God and the doctor we alike adore, but only when in danger, not before; The danger o'er, both are alike requited. God is forgotten, and the Doctor slighted"!'

Jarre frowned. 'Self-pity, Doctor?'

'Good advice, Inspector. If the Directory knew too much about me, I might have to start taking an interest in them. I suspect neither of us wants that.'

'I'll do my best, Doctor.'

'As long as we understand each other, Inspector.'

Later, in the rue Morgue, Emil shook the Doctor's hand. 'We won't forget you. Nor your brave companions. All the Quoth from the rest of the Family are now in me awaiting, ah, your assistance.' He reached out and touched and side of Roz's head. She stood dead still.

'It is done,' Emil said.

'How's the artists' colony?' the Doctor asked. 'I allowed the police to believe they were all dead, but I think you have more chance of helping them recover.'

'We hope to heal all the Brotherhood in time. It will be difficult. Their

bodies are normal now, but their minds?' He threw up his hands. 'Who's to say?'

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'Exactly.'

'Pardon?'

'Never mind. How are your father and mother?'

'Better. There's a certain hollowness in all our minds where the Quoth once dwelt, but we still have our little talents.' Emil's face lengthened and the colour of his eyes changed.

Chris looked startled.

'Subcutaneous muscle control and pigmentation dispersal,' the Doctor said. 'Bravo. I ' m glad you can put a brave face on things. How are the children?'

'Perfect.'

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Epilogue

In the Vortex

The TARDIS hurtled towards the centre of Mutter's Spiral, moving through the Vortex like a galleon in strange seas. There were gravitational reefs deep in the galaxy's mass, intrusions of real-space into the Vortex like jagged rocks or breakwaters. The Doctor steered with a sea-shanty on his hps, and the air of a windjammer captain. Roz avoided the console room whenever possible and waited for the mood to pass.

The Doctor seemed overly cheerful, even fay; as if some weight, some distant trouble, had been removed from his soul; and Chris wished he could share this rarest of the Time Lord's moods. His heart was not in it, however, not while Roz stomped round the ship with a temper like a thunder-head. He guessed she found the knowledge that the Quoth surrounded them, and moved within them, a strain. He felt it too. Though never vastly introspective, he was aware of a strange nervous irritation, like static on the back of his neck. He was bathing more than usual, and once he awoke with a start in the mock-Roman tepidarium with a wirebrush clenched in his left hand. The sooner the Quoth were gone the better he would like it. For the first time he felt something of Roz's automatic dislike for aliens. He was not sure if it made him ashamed for himself, or simply more in awe of her sense of justice. To feel like this, and still to have invited them into her body! It was hard to sympathize with a race of aliens smaller than the nucleus of an atom.

They reached their destination on the fourth day. The neutronium revenant of a first-generation star, one of the first to form from the slowing wavefront of the Big Bang, it had been boosted through its life-cycle by the dense photon pressure of the galactic core. Before the Earth had cooled, it had shed its gas cloud and ceased to emit radio pulses. Now it barely rotated, its mass locked by the competing pulls of other dark stars.

The TARDIS came out of the space-time vortex a millimetre above its surface and fell like a brontosaurus with one of those flimsy paper hang-gliders. Even so its impact made no sound. There was no atmosphere to carry sound and no loose surface material to carry vibratory packets of heat.

Nothing moved here, ever.

In the console room, Chris crossed his arms and rubbed absent-mindedly at his shoulders. Compared to the surface of a neutron star, space is a forgiving place; blossoming with virtual particles, sprinkled with cosmic rays, interpenetrated by clouds of organic matter. This was a grave in space.

Internally it retained some power, smeared veins of quarks like those in which the Quoth had evolved, but on the surface it was simply a vast cinder of compacted matter.

Roz nipped the TARDIS scanner on, almost defiantly.

No secrets humanity was not meant to know for her, Chris thought. Death of a star or death in the vicarage, it was all one to her. A cop to her fingertips.

The scanner image formed lazily. Chris half-expected it to show nothing but, after a second's white fuzziness, it fizzed into partial life. Gallifreyan technology. How could he have doubted it? They had a treaty with the Dyson Sphere builders after all, people who could house the entire population of Earth's Empire in their wardrobe space without noticing. The trouble was the People's technology looked spectacular, but Gallifrey's science looked like valves and sealing wax, and it was all that was keeping them alive.

The scanner showed the collapsed remains of the star in shades and tones of grey, the whole tinged with the indigo light that falls at the bottom of a deep gravity well. Even the 271

blue-shifted light looked tired and broken. Autumnal, Chris thought, and then chided himself for thinking of something so meaningless as the autumn of a star. He found himself holding the edge of the console tightly.

Outside, gravity, the softest force in the universe, a force so weak that a hand-held magnet could overpower the amount of it generated by the whole Earth, had smoothly and silently ground protons and electrons into neutrons. If he were to step outside, out of the leading edge of the force-shield that sheathed the external event shell of the TARDIS, he would be plated over the surface a fraction of a nanometre deep.

The Doctor depressed the red-handled lever on the TARDIS console. Halfway down, three-quarters down. Chris eyed the doors nervously.

Roz nodded, impatient. Get it over with, her body language said.

The TARDIS groaned. The inner doors opened and the Quoth leapt into the void between the inner and outer doors into the existential depths of the real-world gearing. The Doctor thrust the door control back, closing the inner door.

He smiled at Chris and Roz. 'Cheer up. There's no danger at all here. A TARDIS is absolutely stable even in gravity fields stronger than this one. The mathematical structure can stand this for oh, oodles of time yet.'

"Then why are your fingers crossed?' Roz said.

'Are they?' The Doctor held his right hand up before his eyes. 'I must have been trying to remember something. I wonder what it was?'

'To open the other door?' Chris said tersely.

'That's right.' He tapped at a couple of controls. On the scanner, the outer door swung open and air, dust and Quoth fell in a silver torrent onto the geometric plains of the star.

'Now what?' Chris said.

The Doctor gave a shy smile. 'Now we wait. Anyone fancy a cup of hot chocolate?'

'I fancy an explanation,' Roz said.

' H m m . ' The Doctor was looking for hot chocolate.

'You started to tell Montague about the Quoth. Well, tell me. I want to know what I've had in my head.'

'Okay.' The Doctor steepled his fingers. 'Take three neutron stars, and collide them in exactly the right way. Too much energy and you could get a black hole, too little and you might get a pulsar with second-chance planets. Just right gets you a time engine: a cylinder of neutronium a light-day long, spinning rapidly enough to distort time with its gravity. That was the Quoth home world. Only in that flux of bent time could the barriers between our macro-dimensions and their collapsed dimensions naturally drop. There they evolved by developing patterns that could deflect and control the time-flux. Any

that didn't probably youthened to death.'

Chris looked thoughtful. 'What could destroy a Time Engine?'

The Doctor shuffled his feet. 'Some random cosmic accident, I expect. Anyway, it happened and some Quoth were hurled into space. Eventually they arrived on Earth and started to look for a source of the materials they needed to . . .

em . . . breed. The stresses that permit quarks to exist in the disassociated form necessary to Quoth biology are immense; on a low-gravity planet like Earth the only possible source was organic: the quantum side-effects of psionics.'

'So they started eating people's brains,' Chris said.

Roz glared at him.

'Not quite. The material they were extracting was one which had a fairly narrow half-life anyway, nothing you would miss, but in the process of extracting it they stimulated the psychic nodes in their hosts' brains, driving them to new levels of power. In Montague - and in his followers and even his enemies, since they learnt from his example - a process of feedback enslaved the Quoth: blighted them. The host wished for greater power, so the Quoth mined more to release more power, to make more Quoth to mine more power, and on and on.'

'And now they are free,' Roz said. 'What do you think a race of sub-nanite reality-engineers with the ability to turn humanoids into gods are going to do to the politics of this galaxy? How long before we are their slaves?'

The Doctor shook his head. 'Let's deal with that if we have to. I think we can extend a little trust.'

Roz snorted.

Paris, 1903

Emil looked up as the shop bell tinkled, thinking that Madelaine was back from picking up the children from their grandfather's. The family always spoilt the children; M a d e l i n e ' s parents complained they barely saw them.

It was not his wife but a man in his middle forties, dressed in stiff tweeds and stout walking shoes, a battered travelling-bag slung over his shoulder. Emil watched indulgently while he pottered around the piles of books in the foreground of the shop, chortling to himself in English and rubbing his hands with glee over a longed-for volume here, a rarity there.

Really, Emil should have told him that the shop was closing up now and that he only had the door unlatched for his wife, but the man's enjoyment was so infectious that he set down his account books on the counter and came out to join him. Soon they were chatting away like old friends. The amply upholstered man proved to be quite a connoisseur of old books, topping Emil's tentative quotations with Latin and Greek tags, and amassing - the shopkeeper in Emil noted - a respectable stack of purchases.

Emil was wrapping the books in brown paper, the heaviest

- a Latin translation by Olaus Wormius the Lesser - at the bottom, when the man gave a gasp and flung his right arm up over Emil's shoulder, grabbing Emil's other arm to steady himself.

'I say! H o w much is that?'

Emil swivelled in the man's grasp and saw that his eyes, piercing within the magnifying circles of his gold-rimmed spectacles, had lit on the strawberry-gothic doll's house that stood alone on a shelf at the back of the shop. On the Doll's House. Emil still emphasized it in his thoughts. Gently he disengaged the man's grip.

' I ' m afraid that is not for sale. It's by way of being an 274

heirloom, you see. It was my father's when he owned the shop. He was in the toy line then.'

'Did he make it himself? It looks very old.'

'He, ah, acquired it from an old English family'

'Really, do you know which? I ' m something of an anti-quarian, you see, and I can't help but think there's something familiar about that house.'

Emil shrugged. 'Possibly, Monsieur. I really do not know.'

He disliked lying to this charming man but the House had done quite

enough harm, and even though the Doctor had assured them that it was harmless, he still preferred to keep it in sight, and to keep its history to himself.

The man sighed and paid for the books. Turning to go, he pulled a card from his pocket and passed it to Emil. 'If you do learn more of its history, this is where I can be reached.

It looks like it might have possibilities. Um, yes, definite possibilities.' Still waving his brown paper parcel, the man grabbed his bag to his side and, pushing the door with his back, went out into the night.

Emil shrugged and threw the card into the waste-paper basket behind the counter, the receptacle into which he pitched all the detritus that people left between the pages of books they no longer wanted. It rested there, its black lettering dark against the cream card: Montague Rhodes James, Provost's Lodge, King's College, Cambridge.

T h e N e u t r o n Star

Roz saw it first. 'Is that it?'

The Doctor blinked at the scanner's blurred image, and focused it downwards.

'You have to make allowances for relative cultures. It's quite an achievement, under the circumstances.'

Chris stared at the screen. He snorted with laughter, and realized that he felt free.

Roz glared at him and then, to his immense surprise, cracked up. Her laughter was rich and wild. He almost stopped laughing from shock, but instead the sight set him off 275

even more. Perhaps there was hope for him and Roz yet.

The Doctor cleared his throat.

'I may not know much about art,' he said - with the smug intonation of someone who knew an awful lot and was not averse to letting people know it - 'but I know what I like.'

'That?'

'Yes, that.'

Chris glanced at Roz, who was staring up at the ceiling.

'Very, er, nice,' he said.

The Doctor scowled. 'Nice!' He started the dematerializa-tion. 'Humans. No sense of artistry.'

Warleader no longer, but gifted with a third name, Blight-ender watched the made and their makings playing on the broad steps of the great monument. From this point they would colonize the star, digging the rich veins of birthing matter from beneath its surface. The lost paradise is regained, it thought.

His old friend the surveyor burst out of the time-like underpinnings of the colossal structure in a thrashing ball of spines and clutching limbs. The children patterned their mock-fear and darted for the arbitrary points of safety, each in a different spatial dimension. Learning all the time, Blight-ender thought fondly. Building on their initial synthesis.

They, not it, would be the true inheritors of this paradise. It felt itself solidifying, freezing its own memories. Soon now it would be an Oldest.

The map-maker puffed itself up beside him. <Do you like it?> It gestured, what was the term, ah yes, *up*. Blight-ender considered. It was resolved never to lie to his friend again, never to lie to anyone. <It's horrible, > it patterned.

<I know,> Map-maker scrolled happily over its communicating surface.

Above them, stretching an almost infinite *height* into the vastness of the four macrodimensions, the memorial stood in all its evil realism. Quoth space, their prison for so long, now the permanent relic of their slavery.

Crooked and broken, the millimetre-high Doll's House leered out across the neutron star.

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